

THE REAL SILVESTRI

Avvocato Peyrani, a lawyer from Turin, was driving to Saint-Raphaël to see a client. He stopped in a small French town, and there met again Aurora, a woman he had not seen for years. Once she had been married (so he thought) to a man he rather disliked, and loved by a man he was proud to consider his best friend: Gustavo Silvestri.

Peyrani had known Silvestri since boyhood: known him and, like many others, forgiven him his ugliness, his ill-health and his ineffectiveness for the overriding reason that Silvestri was wholly *good*. What, thought Peyrani, were the feverish, unreliable joys of love compared with the solid comfort of such a friendship?

Now, at this chance meeting with Aurora, long after Silvestri's death, Peyrani learned that she had seen his friend in a light quite different from his own. To her that dear, simple, childlike face had been 'dirty and evil'. Half horrified, half curious, he listened to Aurora's story. As he worked his way towards the truth about Silvestri, he learned the truth about Aurora, the truth about himself—the truth, even, about friendship. This novel, so simple and entertaining in its form, makes some very subtle points.

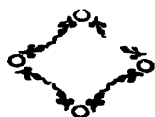
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Capri Letters

Dinner with the Commendatore

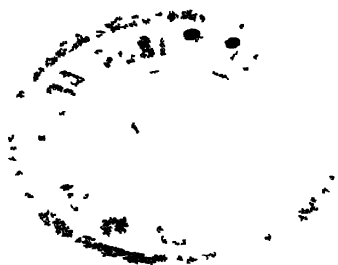
The Confession

THE REAL SILVESTRI



MARIO SOLDATI

*Translated from the Italian
by Archibald Colquhoun*



ANDRE DEUTSCH

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON LTD
WORCESTER AND LONDON

*. i docili morti, i strazii leggeri
co i altri povari morti se sconde . . .*

NOVENTA

THE REAL SILVESTRI



I HAPPENED TO be back in Turin for Christmas and was just finishing my holiday when an old client of mine, a businessman by the name of Dogliotti, suddenly called me over to Saint-Raphaël. A matter of vetting a deed-of-purchase for a villa.

It was a mild winter and the Alpine roads were passable; instead of driving down to Genoa and along the coast I decided to cross the Mont-Genèvre and reach Saint-Raphaël by Gap and Castellane.

Happy thought. The deeper I plunged into the mountain valley, the more I felt my heart soar at the sight of mountain-tops and snow-caps I'd known since my youth. As I drove I was humming a tune which comes into my head every time I have the illusion—more and more rarely, alas, now—that life is about to offer something new. It was the tune Musetta sings in *Bohème* at the beginning of the fourth act, with Marcello's words about past youth and present hope.

Against the tense and tender blue I recognized little rocky pinnacles and passes and ice-caps I'd climbed in

those faraway days, and I found myself yearning to stop the car at the first mule-path and clamber up as I had before. Of course, reason intervened; and then came doubts. What would happen if I really did obey the call? Suppose I felt ill after a couple of hours' climbing? Would I have the strength to get back?

Who knows? My inclination—it wasn't really a hope, just a wish—to climb at all was unusual enough. But anyway I'd no equipment. Not even the essential gaiters-boots. Sighing, without quite giving up the idea, I stepped on the accelerator; perhaps I'd make Briançon for lunch.

But awaiting me at the top of the valley were a number of nasty surprises; new houses, changes. It seemed both sad and amazing that the people of the valley, with all this mania for so-called progress, hadn't changed the Italian names of the villages, adopted in Fascist times, back to what they'd been before. Some of those old names were not even French, but dated from the time of Catus, they were relics, that is, of a period far earlier than any French domination . . . Did it matter though? All present-day Italians, of any political party, even up here, hate the old and seem determined never to give a look back.

I felt quite the opposite. And yet, to be fair, I had to recognize that in my dislike for the changes in the villages I was passing, and in my nostalgic evocation of

the past; what most annoyed me was those names; and in some obscure way I felt that to be the only point where I was right. Life continuously destroys and re-creates, of course. Those Italian names were odious not because they were new, but because their newness was not due to any spontaneous development in popular language; they had just been thought up on some office desk in Rome and imposed by bureaucracy.

From Oulx to Cesana the villages all lie on the other side of the valley to the road. Reachable only by paths cut off from progress, they had remained just as I remembered them thirty years before, and as they had been no doubt for centuries. On the rocky flanks of little valleys, amid the lilac-white of snows, the grey of larches and the black of rocks, they stood out not by their colour, which was grey-black and lilac-white like all the rest, but by the regular parallel lines of their snow-covered roofs and eaves.

That, said I to myself, is the only sign of life in this wild valley. the lines—their geometry, their regularity. Then it occurred to me that we do sometimes find geometry in nature; in crystals, for instance. Those hamlets glimpsed suddenly from a distance might have been wedged into the landscape by nature, part of the mountain itself; looking, at first sight, not so much due to the hand of man, but to rocky formations that

happened to be strangely irregular in shape; tricks of nature, in fact. What else, though, looked at that way, is the whole of humanity and all its works? Things we usually consider immense; compared to the universe they are mere mushrooms on the earth's crust. Spirit, reason, what about them? But they exist outside the human brain; the geometry of crystals, or that of shadows, or a stone designing perfect concentric circles when it falls into a pool. . . .

I don't believe in progress. For every new medicine there is a new disease. Every invention that makes life what is called more comfortable and more beautiful corresponds to the loss of other comforts and other beauties which are at least equivalent. Take slavery; it's still with us, everywhere, in innumerable forms. Society is not moving, never can move, towards equality; no, it will forever oscillate between equality and its opposite. Because the urge for equality and the urge for servility are both equally innate in man. There will always be those who want to command; for there will always be those who prefer service to the responsibilities and strains of liberty.

I live alone, with an old Hungarian cook and an old Tuscan maid. My home is in Rome, where I practise as a lawyer. I have no children. I am unmarried. My life could have been different; and happier. And not a day or an hour passes without my regretting it, and my

reviewing, sometimes with a wry laugh, what last chances I may have of finding myself a wife.

Just now, as I began this story, I tried, understandably, to adopt a tone that was serene and detached. That is why I said it is rare, nowadays, alas, for me to have the illusion that life is about to offer me something new.

Well, I lied! Never once do I start a journey, or even leave my home, open my mail, hear a ring on the telephone, without my heart beating like a boy's; is this she?

At past fifty, all this is both unseemly and absurd; I realize it perfectly well. And as I climbed towards the frontier from Oulx to Cesana, and thought of the Coturn names, of the rock-formation villages, of humanity-like a mushroom, of the non-existence of progress I was really trying, by my ruminations, to find distraction and calm. So as not to hear the silly beating of my heart. So as to cheat this wearisome unwearying affinity of mine for adventure. What did I hope, though, now?

I console myself by the thought that quite soon it will be too late. Then at last, I'll live a calm life; I'll try to prepare myself for death as well as I can, and that will be that.

The frontier had been moved. It no longer followed the natural line of the water-shed. By the peace treaty

France now extended a couple of miles into our valley, the waters of whose torrents end in the Adriatic and not even in the Tyrrhenian, and French territory reached the houses just outside Clavières.

This change did not worry me as much as the others had. I recognized the peace treaty as just, though to Italy's disadvantage. And anyway, apart from a hut with gendarmes, a flag, a bar across the road, the French had changed nothing at all. The real France began, as it had before, a little higher up, at the scattered snow-covered roofs, with their sharper eaves, and the few grey houses grouped on the vast white expanse of the flanks of Montgenèvre.

It must have been a few minutes before midday when I arrived. The sky was blue and the sun glittering, on the wide snow fields crowded with skiers and crossed by the wire railway, on the rounded woody hillocks fringing the gaunt pyramid of the Janus, and on the brilliant white iceflows and black peaks of the Pelvoux range far away, high up beyond the shell of Briançon.

I go to France on business for Dogliotti and on my own affairs, at least three or four times a year. Even so I entered the narrow street between the little houses of Montgenèvre with a quiver of pleasure. Perhaps it was due to the memory of my youth, at Montgenèvre, I think. I passed the frontier for the first time, at the age

of fifteen or so; or perhaps, to the size of the houses against the vast serene majesty of the landscape. For here nothing was changed. The French are conservatives. Even the placards on the walls, a blue advertisement for Dubonnet, faded and peeling, seemed the same.

I drove slowly round the fountain, stopped, got out of the car; I wanted only to stretch my legs, stroll a bit in those alleys, glance in the windows of the little shops. I was particularly drawn to a tobacconist's I'd noticed at the entry of the village; ancient, dusty, dowdy.

I was not mistaken. In the narrow fly-blown window were old postcards, coloured samples of *sucre d'orge*, some *pain d'épice*, all joys, in fact, of a lost childhood. Can French children possibly still have the same tastes? I don't think so; to prove it, I only had to turn from the window to the ski fields, with their modern equipment and crowds, including yes, numerous children, some very young. Well, what of it? Perhaps none of them asked the shopkeeper for such goodies nowadays; but he still kept them in the window from laziness, meanness, or habit. I pushed open the glass-fronted door; the old door-bell tinkled and went on tinkling gently for half a minute. A smell of must, ink, and tobacco. A trembly, bored old man. I bought cigarettes and matches, and went out. But to get back to the

square I took an alley behind the houses instead of the main road. My idea was to go as far as the church, whose Romanesque tower I could see above the roofs. In the alley the snow had been beaten down only along a narrow central path, with room for one. I was looking at the tower as I walked along. Then I put a foot wrong, and plunged in the snow up to the ankles. No harm done; I'd soaked one of my socks, and I had only to change it--a minor bore. I went back to the car, and was just about to open my bag when I saw in front of me, three yards away, a window full of woollen sweaters and socks. The shop was very different from the others, perhaps the only modern one in the whole village. There was a big sign: AUX SPORTS D'HIVER, and in the centre of the window, in the midst of the various garments, a dummy of a girl ski-ing.

I had no feeling of presentiment. All I was thinking of was the petty bother of opening my suit-case and groping about inside it. Much simpler to buy a fine pair of woollen socks; better than my own, which were cotton.

So I entered the shop. In a corner a bearded man was reading a paper. He turned round as soon as he saw me and asked, in French with a strong Italian accent, what I wanted. Then he got up, sighing, and with heavy steps went around the counter to search about in some

boxes which were in the drawers on the side walls. Eventually he put on the counter two packets of socks for me to choose from. He seemed to have great difficulty with his French; so I spoke to him in Italian; I wanted some woollen socks, I said, but thinner ones. He replied with a sigh, almost a gasp, that he had some but would have to look them out; it would take time; now it was past midday and he had to shut up shop. From his accent I guessed he might be Roman. I asked him.

'Yes. Why? Can you tell by my voice?' he replied with a tired smile.

I said that though I wasn't Roman myself I'd lived in Rome for many years; and that I would be very grateful to him if he could find me those socks. I was just passing through and needed some at once.

'I'll just call the signora. She'll be the one to find them.' He went, still with that heavy step, towards a door on the other side of the counter, pulled back a curtain and called hoarsely: 'Aurora!'

'*Oui, dans une minute!*' replied a woman's voice, probably from a room above.

'She's just coming. Do sit down,' concluded the bearded man, and with one hand made a vague gesture towards a chair. Then he went to the glass door, and turning his back to me, stood there looking out; the

skiers were returning from the fields and entering the Hotel du Col for lunch.

What an odd person! I thought watching him. He was tall and heavily built, but quite young and too fat for his age. He had a full beard, short and curly, chestnut coloured with bronze glints. It looked false. Perhaps what gave this impression was the cheeks between eyes and beard, they were glistening and red, almost scarlet. His shoulders were round, his hips huge and his stomach seemed to start from his chest. All this mass of flesh seemed exaggerated by the thick, white, rather tight sweater he wore. With his hands dug in his trouser pockets he stood there whistling rather rudely and looking out, screwing up his eyes at the blitting snow. In fact he was the sort I wouldn't have been surprised to find behind the counter of some wine-bar in Mestreve or the slaughter-house of Testaccio. But here, in this snow, among these retiring gentle-looking little houses his presence seemed incongruous, almost sinister.

A sharp clatter of heels down wooden steps, accompanied by a loud tinkling of bracelets, made me turn round. A bare arm with bracelets pulled aside the curtain, and Aurora appeared.

I knew her! We'd met before!

Aurora! Almagia, the wife of Almagia Ulderico Almagia, a client and friend whom I'd not seen for

more than five years, since his emigration to Brazil. Although the name Aurora is not very common I had not thought of my old friend's wife, as I heard the bearded man call her. How could I have? I thought she was in Brazil too. And if she hadn't recognized me at the same instant, and hadn't given a little cry, and called my name, I'd have sworn that it was not more than a resemblance.

'Avvocato Peyrani! How very nice to see you again! What are you doing here? Just passing through? How nice!' She was rolling her 'r's; I remembered her voice, and that she was French, born in Morocco, I think.

'And Ulderico?' said I, instinctively kissing her hand. 'Is he here too? In Europe?'

'Heavens no,' she replied in an undertone. Suddenly serious, she sighed as if I'd reminded her of some dreadful offence and worry. 'Don't let's talk about it,' she added and glanced a second towards the bearded man, who had not moved from the window and was still standing with his back to us. I realized I'd made a gaffe. Embarrassed, I bent over the counter and pretended to examine the socks.

Aurora glanced at a little gold and diamond wrist-watch I remembered very well; then she turned to the bearded man and said loudly:

'Romolo, c'est midi passé; tu as bien fermé, n'est-ce pas?'

• The man turned, and pointing to me, muttered I had to be served.

‘But the Avvocato is an old friend and is staying to luncheon with us, aren’t you, Peyrani?’ went on Aurora, smiling and cordial once more. And then, suddenly remembering, ‘Oh, how silly of me, I haven’t introduced you yet. Signor Pollastrini, my husband. Avvocato Peyrani . . . how long is it we’ve known each other? Ten years, maybe more.’

With a bitter-sweet smile the bearded man came to shake my hand, then he went out and began pulling down the metal blind that shut up the shop. While this was going on Aurora explained rapidly

‘I’m divorced from Almagià. Didn’t you know?’

‘No, not at all,’ I said loudly in my surprise. ‘I thought you’d gone off to Brazil with him.’

‘I did, and then to Uruguay, where we divorced.’

But, forgive my asking why? I was Ulderico’s lawyer, you always seemed to me to get on so well. What happened?’

Aurora hesitated, she looked at me as if scrutinizing me, glanced towards the bearded man to assure herself that he was still outside, and finally whispered to me

‘You were a friend of Silvestri’s, weren’t you?’

‘Of poor Silvestri’s?’ I said in amazement. ‘My



dearest friend. It was he who introduced me to Almagià. What has Silvestri to do with it?

‘Well,’ exclaimed Aurora in a hard voice, with a tightening of the lips, ‘my divorce, my losing Almagià, it was all his fault.’



GUSTAVO SILVESTRI WAS an old and very close friend of mine, who'd died five years before. A Piedmontese, a literary man, a bachelor, he lived by spending piece-meal the small capital left him by his father, a notary, and by publishing a few badly paid articles in newspapers and reviews at rare intervals.

His health had been precarious and his whole life, from adolescence, had been without any discipline at all; harmless, yet disordered and full of excesses. He smoked and drank too much, particularly spirits; and while still a young man, he contracted a serious kidney disease, from which he died at only forty. Vaguely socialist in politics, romantic, almost decadent about art and literature, he was in every thought and act the docile resigned victim of an invincible inferiority complex. Short, thin, ugly, weak and ill, with bad teeth and little hair, he could never forget his own appearance even for a few seconds. Convinced that everyone found him revolting and disagreeable, he refused to take on any work, however serious or important, entailing any personal responsibility beyond

the signing of an occasional article. The truth, which I never tired of pointing out to him and which he always refused to see, was, of course, just the opposite.

Silvestri, by his very humility and wry humour, was one of those rare people who are liked wherever they go. In the first place, as he produced so little, he aroused no one's envy. His journalistic and literary colleagues, even the most evil of them, were so sure he was lazy and inefficient that they could afford to seem generous for once, and, knowing they risked nothing, went out of their way to praise him publicly as much as they could. Often they would use his name to compare favourably with some recent reputation they were running down or with some writer who had just been successful, through merit or good luck. Of course that job mustn't be given to so-and-so, they'd say, but to Silvestri! Silvestri, now, there's a character for you! Silvestri really does know how to wield a pen! A pity that he'll never get down to anything, because if he wants to, Silvestri can wipe the floor with the lot of them!

But apart from false praise in those circles Silvestri was also loved by whoever knew him, in every company and class, for he was profoundly good. His bitterness he turned only on himself, and never against others, against life. He would be sincerely enthusiastic about every glass of wine he was offered, about a ray

of passing sun on any landscape; and he would even find the landscape marvellous under driving rain. He would listen, not just patiently but with real interest, to the confidences and outbursts, often futile, of whoever he came across. Lastly he was a fascinating talker himself; witty, generous; ready to plunge the whole of himself into a discussion; and ready to keep silent at the slightest sign of any remark of his being unwelcome.

Women instinctively found him sympathetic and sought his company. Whatever their standing, their culture, or degree of beauty, they felt themselves always appreciated by him. But he never took advantage of this, for the simple reason that he never noticed it.

At every period of his life ever since his first year at the university, I can remember Silvestri being hopelessly and desperately in love. That is no figure of speech. He could not live without love; a definite, concrete love for a particular woman. At the same time he could not love the woman, could not even fix his thoughts on her, except on one condition; that there was no chance, no hope, of his love ever being returned.

Women, in the language of most of them, called Silvestri a sentimentalist, a poet; he needed to idealize them that is, and was quite content just to court them;

to go further, they said, would have revolted him. Nothing fals^er. Silvestri, like all really good people, was strongly sensual. He did not despise women, and certainly not the physical act of love. In fact, he would never have written those two words *physical act*. They would have seemed like blasphemy to him. For him, love, in all its forms and of whatever duration, was Love; the ultimate and ineffable revelation, the most wonderful thing in life. Real prostitutes did not exist; prostitution was only a word, invented by social hypocrisy. For no sum of money can repay an ecstasy which, in its essence, is sublime. Love and money, he would say, are incompatible terms. It's true, he would also say, that love can be shown by money; but money, in every case, is infinitely beneath.

Given this point of departure; given, that is, the initial indifference, if not actual aversion, to him of the women he chose, he was fated never to have a successful affair with a girl or young married woman of the middle or upper classes, and not even with an honest woman from the working class. During his period at the university of Turin he never even succeeded, as we all did, in making a mistress of one of the seamstresses we used to follow under the arcades or meet in the dance halls. Even then Silvestri would always link up with some tart or other in the end. Soubrettes from the Maffei Theatre, dancers from Cabiria's or Fougez'

revues, street girls, his ardour knew no limits or differences. He was an only son; his father, who adored him, gave him a big allowance for amusement. And to every girl in turn he would make extravagant presents, buy dresses, bags, little jewels; take them at night, after the show, to supper at Dilei's. Our girls, most of whom worked in some shop, were at home asleep by that hour. But if, at about seven, we happened to enter Mulassano's or Baratti's for a drink, he with his girl and we with ours, it was always embarrassing; the seamstresses did not want to be taken for revue-dancers, so he could not join our company. He would stay in a corner, at the end of the bar, beside some showy platinum blonde in a false fox-fur stole; he would raise his glass of bitter Vermouth as if unintentionally towards us, and laugh, screwing up his sly yet innocent eyes. I can still see him, dear, warm-hearted Silvestri!

Once the girl with him had come straight from one of the houses in Via Michelangelo. She was no worse than any of the others in appearance; in fact, poor thing, she'd done all she could to dress quietly, not to be conspicuous. But we had all, every one of us, been with her. She was also recognized by lots of other customers, at the bar, men in the professions, officers, bureaucrats. The looks, the winks, the subdued laughter, can be imagined. Silvestri coped with the

situation well. He became more attentive to the girl than ever, and when he looked around towards us or the others, seemed to take no offence nor even to notice the atmosphere of irony. And he, in his turn, treated us ironically, with a gentle irony, as if he was sorry we couldn't all share his happiness and good luck.

Of course, he never was lucky, and never happy, except for some brief period, during those years at the university.

He took his law degree in July of 1924, then left, as he had long planned, for Paris. A few days after he arrived his enthusiasm was such that he wanted to spend the rest of his life there. He stayed only three months, recalled to Turin by the sudden death of his father. Then he never had a chance of returning. His father had left him much less than he had expected, and moreover, he could touch no capital until his mother's death; there was also a rice farm at Olcenengo, in the Vercellese, which he had to look after, though the income from it would never amount to much.

Anyway that journey to Paris was of paramount importance to him. From that moment on, to live in Paris was his dream. And for that he saved money and gambled on the stock exchange. He lost, of course. Sometimes, if urged to do more work, he would justify his own laziness by saying: 'Writing, study . . .

what do they matter to me? If I lived in Paris, yes, that would be quite different!' He stayed on with his mother in Turin, getting more and more cut off, as the years went by, from his few real friends, who had happened to move to other cities. He had mistresses, of course. One after the other, always of the same kind. Often he was just on the point of marrying; then he would give it all up at the last moment, so as not to pain his sick old mother; soon afterwards he would lose that particular woman as mistress too, for she would leave him or be unfaithful as soon as she realized he was not going to marry her.

Anti-Fascist by nature and by upbringing, he did not often come to Rome. He needed some excuse every time; a rice deal with the Ministry, some literary collaboration. Really he came to see me. He travelled second class, arrived in the morning, stayed two or three days, then left again. I used to go to the Termini station regularly to meet him and see him off. He would stay with me. At night we sat up late, chatting in my study; in season we would dine out at some place in Trastevere and then walk till dawn through the deserted streets. We saw each other so seldom—once, at most twice a year—that we always had inexhaustible subjects for conversation. And if for him the finest thing in life was love, for me it was, and still is, friendship. Of course, love gives a joy infinitely

more intense. The whole of our being, body and soul, takes part, closely, inextricably entwined, perhaps even to real fusion. But that serene and sweet detachment, that lofty calm with which two friends, talking in the quiet night of a foreign city, contemplate the world and explore the mysteries of existence as if a veil were about to fall, that feeling of being still alive yet somehow dead at the same time, happy in this one certainty, this one demonstrable creed, of mutual trust, with no demands and no offers, with no gratitude, no possession, no servitude, no renunciation, no jealousy, no fear; what then is friendship if not the highest form of love?

During the last two years of the war we were separated, he in Turin, I in Rome. Meanwhile his mother died. When finally I saw him again, in the summer of '45, I suddenly found him much aged. He was showing clear symptoms of his disease, which was very serious and really incurable, but might, with a lot of care, a strict diet, and an ordered life, have been kept at bay for many years.

He arrived in Rome from Turin by plane, together with an official of the Allied Military Government who had been his guest in his house at Olcenengo after the liberation and who had become a close friend. This official was a Venetian who had taken refuge in the United States before the war and become an American

citizen. In civil life he was an engineer and businessman; his name was Ulderico Almagià.

Those who lived through that summer can remember very clearly its extraordinary atmosphere for most Italians, that is for all anti-Fascists and for those who had not compromised too much with Fascism. After years of want, terror and horror, came peace, security, prosperity, above all the lively hope of a different, happier world. Of course, reason and common sense warned us even then that it was a false hope, or at least an exaggerated one. But who was capable of reason from May to October of that year? Who had kept his common sense? All those who were alive and free were so glad of it that they could give serious thought to nothing except happiness and hope. Family, friends, lovers, long divided, without news and often worried about each others' fates, met again, embraced, started life together once more with a harmony which, they swore, would never more be disturbed. Oh, the interminable dinners in the hot nights of that Italian summer, the wonderful stories everyone told everyone else, the adventures they had all been through! And we were all generous, we all loved each other. Those with money lent it without being asked and without guarantee to whoever happened to be without it. No one was afraid another might be a nuisance. We would go smiling up to some vaguely recognized face in the

street, stop and ask how things had gone. Every acquaintance was almost a friend. And the promises to meet again! And all those plans for the future! Made with the lightheartedness, the optimism, the megalomania of children on the first days of the holidays, thinking of their games.

Silvestri too, of course, was overwhelmed by the general happiness. He too, in spite of his appearance and his disease, felt himself renewed. On reaching Rome he confided the grave diagnosis to me, then hurriedly contradicted it. 'I'll get well,' said he, 'I'm sure to get well; it's just a matter of keeping off drink till Christmas!' And he talked to me of a novel which he had begun to write; a little volume of verse he was preparing for publication; a journey, to Paris of course, that he wanted to make as soon as it was possible; and finally of an irrevocable decision which he had made in the last few days: to marry and have children.

'Marry? Who?' I asked, laughing.

'I don't know yet,' he answered, laughing louder than I did and winking an eye almost to closing, with that expression of his which was so human, subtle and sympathetic.

'But have you any idea?' I insisted.

No. The extraordinary thing was that Silvestri, for the very first time in his life, was fancy free. At that

moment he had no flame. But he was certain of meeting her. 'In Rome,' he joked, 'I'll find her in Rome!'

He had come to Rome with the idea of staying a few months. And I was delighted to put him up once again at my home, and to put up his friend Almagià as well, since hotel rooms were so hard to find at the time.

Almagià was a man of about forty-five, tall, grizzled, smart, self-assured. He talked with equal ease Italian, French, and English. He had gone through the last part of the war as an AMG official in France; and been sent to Piedmont only a few days before the liberation. Now, thanks to some powerful connexion in Washington, he was in process of being discharged considerably earlier than any of his colleagues, and was already putting out the first feelers to take up business relations as quickly as possible. His line was a particularly profitable one; real estate on a vast scale. He had kept useful contacts in all the major Italian cities and by putting these into touch with his new American friends he was sure to make a great deal of money. Silvestri took no interest in any of this. He merely brought Almagià to the house and introduced me as what I was; a business lawyer, professor of civil law at Rome University. Almost inevitably I became Almagià's legal adviser. But as soon as we two began

talking of contracts, quotas, discounts and percentages, Silvestri would slip silently away.

How had two men so opposed in character and tastes as he and Almagià been able to understand each other? This too must, I think, be put down to that exceptional summer, be judged in the atmosphere of the liberation. Think of the scene; end of April, early May, cottages lost in the rice-fields, a row of poplars with their first leaves, and an eighteenth-century villa with peeling walls and faded shutters, but still with a few bottles of Gaştinara in the cellar. Almagià in his jeep, tired, hungry, arrowing along the row of poplars and suddenly finding coming towards him, with open arms and pleasant smile, the surest anti-Fascist, though the poorest too, of all the landowners in the district, Dottor Gustavo Silvestri! Almagià? Italian? Venetian even? We've some champagne still! And last night we didn't sleep; we fished for frogs; as we fished our ears were cocked towards Salasco and Santhià, for the rumble of the first American columns. Were any Germans fleeing along the same road? Oh, it was you? Welcome to liberated Olcenengo, Captain Almagià; frogs *a la Meunière*, Veuve Cliquot '27!

Next Vercelli, an office, requisitioning, subsidies, listening to peasants' complaints, all the boring business of American military bureaucracy; every night Captain Almagià returns to Olcenengo and sits down

happily to his risotto. After supper Silvestri takes his guitar and plays and sings old songs of Piedmont, with that soft voice of his which is almost like the echo or memory of distant music. Almagià, pleasantly tipsy, is touched: he didn't know there were Piedmontese songs and from the eighteenth century too! In America they know only songs from Naples. Or another evening there is a party for—oh, not the local gentry—but for the petty bourgeoisie of the district, fathers, mothers, youths and girls. There's a little orchestra and dancing. Almagià is still a fine-looking man, with those velvety eyes of his; he has a wife but Silvestri is the only one who knows that; so he's a good match, all think. Dance follows dance; he has a success; he drives home alone with her in his jeep, the daughter of the doctor at Tronzano, fifteen miles or so away. In fact those were holidays for Almagià, perhaps the only ones in his life, and anyway the last. In a short while he would be absorbed by business and become another man. But of Silvestri he will always think with all the sympathy of which his arid heart is capable. Particularly as Silvestri has never asked him, and Almagià knows well never will ask him, for anything at all.

Almagià's wife had stayed behind in the south of France, at her parents' home. He intended bringing her to Rome as soon as possible; as soon as he had

finished his service with AMG. She was French, he said. He'd met her in New York and married her before entering the armed forces. During the war she'd stayed in America and had only returned to France, to her parents, a short time before.

Neither Silvestri nor myself found anything odd in this story. When Almagià talked of his wife we instinctively imagined a woman of his own rather determinedly aristocratic tone and snobbish tastes; a Frenchwoman of the high bourgeoisie, probably from a well-to-do family and belonging to that vast cosmopolitan clan which divides the seasons between Paris, New York, London, and the south of France, busy and bored, with yachting trips, first nights, bridge, golf and riding. . . .

At the end of September, as he had foreseen, Almagià was discharged. He took a luxurious ground floor apartment in a villa in Parioli. Silvestri stayed on with me.

A week later, Aurora arrived.



DARK, TALL, SLIM, powerful, she was a woman of outstanding looks. A paradigm; she imitated no one and many seemed to imitate her. Her skin was naturally bronzed; her hair blue-black and smooth; her legs were long and straight; her feet small in comparison; hands narrow yet not thin; wrists and ankles very slim; she seemed more Spanish than French. A Carmen. There was something Arab, Oriental too, about her face, oval, all long curves like every other part of her body, and about her chiselled lips, ears, and nostrils. Her nose was not aquiline; it was straight, slightly fleshy and slightly rounded, with a sense of voluptuous firmness. She had the same expression in her brown eyes, gleaming but not luminous, and in her open, violent, but brief laugh.

As soon as I met her, I was amazed. Not so much at her physical aspect, for the step up from a working-class to an aristocratic appearance takes only a generation with women, or even a few years of the right background, an education at the Sacré-Coeur. What amazed me was her way of behaving and talking,

which denied at once, and for ever, what we had imagined her being; for Aurora was not, to use the jargon of that society to which we had imagined her belonging, at all *bien*; she was not a *lady*. Her first words, some phrase, revealed a strong southern accent, unconscious, raucous and uncontrolled; it was the French spoken in the cabarets of the Vieux Port and the brothels of Tangier! Her way of holding her hand out was enough; she did it with the emphasis of one who had been unused, from infancy and perhaps for generations, to the dignity of this essentially bourgeois greeting. Pointless in the circles where she had moved shortly before, the gesture is one she is in constant fear of forgetting and so she insists and exaggerates it, almost as if to mark her own progress, to show that she has moved up a notch.

All this was as clear as daylight to me. And yet Silvestri did not see it.

He fell in love with Aurora from the first instant. Perhaps he was already in love with her without having seen her, in expectation of her arrival. She was French, she spoke French, that was enough for him. He did not notice, he did not want to notice, the vulgarity of her accent. As soon as I mentioned it to him, he turned on me and accused me jokingly of envying Almagià; the fox and the grapes, he said to me with a bitter little laugh, perhaps thinking of

himself. I replied that, without being in the least in love with Aurora, I found her most attractive and would be only too pleased to have a little tumble with her; even so I judged her to be a vulgar woman; not only in social origins but also in feelings.

'Sour grapes! Sour grapes!' he repeated, swinging to and fro on his chair and looking at the ceiling, as he used to sometimes when he was most sure of himself. And I realized that I must drop the subject, at least for the moment.

This conversation took place one night in my study, when we had got back from a party at the Almagiàs' a short time after Aurora's arrival in Rome. We were having a cup of camomile tea before going to bed, and the conversation slid, irresistibly, to her. At the party Aurora had worn a grey-green dress shot with metallic reflexions, gold ear-rings and diamonds. Her allure was obvious, and so, alas, was her nature. But Silvestri appeared to see in her only beauty and charms of every kind. He found her attractive, witty, clever, with ready answers and vivacious turns of phrase: that I could still swallow; but he also found her good, generous, civilized and well-bred.

Aurora had appeared to him at a moment when he was ready, almost tensed for her appearance. In the violence of the first superficial impression her foreign nationality had been enough to conquer him. Then in

a few days he got used to her; seeing her, courting her, transforming her into a divinity was all part of the same thing for him, the sweet imbibing of a daily poison.

Finally there was the difficulty of her being the wife of a friend, so that in all likelihood Silvestri's chances were almost nil; the very drop that made the cup overflow, the secret but most potent spring of his passion; his old incapacity to love unless without hope. In fact Silvestri ignored the truth; his chances were nil not because, as he thought, Aurora was unbreachable either by himself or by any other friend of her husband's; but simply because Silvestri himself, in his romantic candour, would never stoop to deceit, to intrigue. He would, if it came to that, have required Aurora to leave her husband openly and ask for a divorce. Now it was clear to us all, even to Silvestri, that, contrary to what we had thought before knowing her, Aurora had no money of her own and attached a great deal of importance to it and so to her husband. She was terrified of him; obeyed his every whim; showed herself docile, submissive, and serious; carefully avoided in her behaviour any suspicion of infidelity. What she was really up to is another matter. Some of Aurora's dresses, particularly her evening ones, were, to me, infallibly revealing. But that was just an intuition on my part, and a private one which

I could communicate to an old friend like Silvestri only had he been willing to listen. From the formal point of view those dresses were just rather provocative, no more.

How, I asked myself (it was useless talking to Silvestri about it), had Almagià made a choice, so much at odds with his sophisticated worldly values, his caution, his coldness? I began to wonder whether he might not be a man of passion underneath it all. Then, gradually, frequenting his company, I realized that the relationship between him and Aurora was subtler. Just as she obeyed and almost served him, so he enjoyed ordering her about, constantly correcting her, instructing her in the rules of good society. Almagià was both proud and jealous, no doubt; but his pride and his jealousy were merely the fruits of an immense vanity. He was not afraid of introducing Aurora to any Roman prince. These accepted her, and, more rarely, invited her, as it was a period of confusion and liberality, and as Almagià was still, in some ways, part of the liberating armies. I did not know what was Aurora's intimate hold over Almagià; perhaps it did not even exist; perhaps it was only his vanity, the easy pleasure of living with a woman whom he considered to be in every possible way inferior to himself, and whom he flaunted publicly just so as to be able to lower her in private. Anyway, it seemed clear

to me that if Aurora did not behave herself, or if one day, for some reason, she were rejected by society, he would have no hesitation in divorcing her.

So passed that first winter after the war. Silvestri had remained in Rome, and we saw the Almagiàs almost every evening. The relations between husband and wife, her ever more obvious submission, might have been thought up on purpose to confirm in Silvestri his illusion—his faith, rather—in the fundamental, unshakeable honesty of Aurora. The desperation of his passion was increased by it. He was in a blind alley.

Silvestri grew sad; he got even thinner, if that was possible. And he began once more, in spite of the doctor's ban, to drink and smoke.

Meanwhile around us the euphoria of the liberation began to fade. Fine plans were abandoned, hopes of a better world vanished. Everyone, little by little, returned to his own shell, to his own interests. Italians, according to a sad but just saying of a contemporary, went back to being what they had been for centuries: fierce home-loving animals.

Silvestri did not write his novel, did not publish his book of poems. He spent his days waiting for evening when he would see Aurora again. And, as he waited, he read all the newspapers and tasted the bitter pleasure of realizing the fatal, progressive failure of any renovating policy. Then, quite suddenly, he was overtaken

by a kidney attack: very serious this time, leaving him supine, weak as a kitten—‘Why go on living?’ he said to me. ‘What have I ahead of me? The horrors of premature old age, tortured by illness and remorse at never getting anything done, not having even enjoyed what I could have enjoyed.’ The doctors prescribed rest, a change of air, a healthy regular life. He made up his mind, and went back to Olcenengo. Spring had begun. The spectacle of nature in his native parts was perhaps the only joy that remained to him.

Before leaving, he asked me one evening, at about seven, to accompany him to say good-bye to Aurora. He did not want to go alone, he feared betraying his emotion. But he chose that hour because Almagià, according to Roman custom, would be out on business till about nine: business which was now going ahead under full sail.

Aurora was waiting for us in the drawing-room. In the corner across from where we entered, she was sitting by a trolley of drinks, her legs crossed, and smoking. Almagià must have taught her that when only men enter a drawing-room, *a lady does not get up*. She was applying the rule to the letter. Even so she held out her hand too soon and shook ours too long before we could kiss hers. She was wearing a woollen dress the colour of blood, very clinging, closed at the neck but baring her arms, and almost revealing her knees.

'Martini? Whisky? Pink gin? You mustn't drink, Silvestri, we know that. . . . Tomato juice for you. And you, Avvocato, what will you have? Would you like me to make you a Bacardi? or a champagne cocktail?' She pronounced these names with a hiss of syllables, like sacramental words; perhaps she was still frightened of making a mistake; and so overdid the list of drinks.

Silvestri's hand, thin, white, almost transparent, trembled slightly as it brushed Aurora's when he took his glass.

'So I hear you're leaving us, eh?' said Aurora, laughing and looking at him fixedly.

'Well . . . so it seems . . . ' replied Silvestri, his face contracting and his eyes screwing up as always with that subtle expression of his; I realized it was only a grimace of defence, but I doubt if Aurora did.

Aurora went on gazing at him fixedly, her eyes dark and very bright, her lovely lips half-open over her strong white teeth, a savage expression on her face as if she were ready to tear him to pieces. But it was an habitual and unconscious expression; every now and again she would fix the person facing her like that.

Though I tried to help things along as best I could, the conversation went ahead in fits and starts, with frequent pauses and searches for new subjects. Silvestri seemed to take almost no part in it; he kept on looking

at Aurora in silence, and his silence and his sadness which finally she noticed too, weighed on our words.

On purpose I brought the conversation round to Olcenengo. Then Silvestri did get animated. He began talking. He described the landscape, the house, life in the rice-fields, and solemnly invited Aurora to visit him—accompanied by her husband, of course. Aurora promised without demur, but also without the enthusiasm which is normally shown in such circumstances.

‘If Ulderico brings me, I’ll certainly come. But when will he find the time? He’s always so busy.’

Silvestri shut his eyes like someone about to plunge under a cold shower, and said almost breathlessly:

‘Well, if he doesn’t bring you, then come alone.’

Aurora was silent a moment, uncertain how to cope with this. She looked at me, looked at him, then turned to me and began talking of something else, in a flat voice, as if to let us understand that she had not been offended, but that Silvestri’s proposal was none the less offensive. In that moment of uncertainty she had clearly been thinking back over Almagià’s rules. How, does a *real lady* behave in such circumstances?

And in spite of Aurora’s not being any kind of a lady, or rather (which comes to the same thing) of her not having any humanity, I thought, as I watched poor Silvestri, of leaving him alone with her for a

few minutes. I looked at the time, pretended to remember something, asked to telephone, and went out into the study, which was next to the drawing-room.

When I re-entered the room Silvestri was standing up, very pale, very nervous, and a long way from Aurora, who was still sitting in the same place and laughing raucously. At once, taking no notice of his tortured supplicating look, Aurora began explaining to me what had happened.

‘Avvocato Peyrani, really your friend seems determined to put his foot in it this afternoon! Imagine, as soon as you went out he decided to tell me he’s desperately in love with me, can’t live without me, and so on. Why, he even knelt at my feet! A comic scene, I can tell you. I haven’t laughed so much for years. Well, Signor Silvestri, there’s certainly no need to. You’re intelligent, a writer, a poet—at least so people say—and you must have realized your mistake by now. But I’d like to give you a reply all the same, here in front of Avvocato, so that there’ll be no misunderstandings and we can remain good friends in future. The reply is this; I am in love with my husband and am sure that I will remain so for the whole of my life. But even if, just for argument, one day I weren’t, I’d never choose a buffoon for lover. I like men who are serious, serious and frank. Hole-in-corner affairs

and intrigues have never appealed to me, and never will.'

There was a short silence. I could think of nothing to say. I looked for a moment at Silvestri, who had taken a step towards the door. Then he turned towards Aurora, made a great effort, and said in a low voice:

'I ask you to excuse me, I've made a mistake. But it was a mistake in my choice of words. My feelings are very different. I realize I have offended you. I hope you will forgive me.'

'I forgive you because you're leaving and we may not see each other again for a long time. Look after yourself in the country, now, and try and learn not to be silly. When you come back to Rome, we'll pretend, both of us, or rather all three of us including Peyrani, that it was all a dream. And you can thank me for not saying a word to my husband!'

He left that same night. Over dinner he insisted on describing the scene to me, trying to repeat the exact words he had used to Aurora while I was out telephoning. First of all he had not asked, he never would ask, anything at all of her; except to listen to the confession of his feelings in a few words. He admired her and was devoted to her, without daring to hope anything at all. If in future, he said, by any twist of chance, Aurora should have any need of him, he put his whole existence, his work, his property at her entire disposal.

He thought he had been quite frank. And yet, he ended, now he realized that he'd made a mistake and that it had been good of Aurora to forgive him. She loved her husband and that was that.

'I'm an idiot. I don't know what I'd give to turn back. This evening, on my way to her, I certainly felt a great need to tell her everything. And I'd sworn to myself to be silent. To look at her for the last time and be silent. Then you went out and I lost my head. I've offended her, of course. A declaration like mine is only made by one who expects . . . an immediate advantage. One who really loves is silent, and waits. Till death, if necessary.'

It was very difficult to tell Silvestri, at that moment, that I did not agree with him at all: that Aurora, I thought, had not been offended in the least. She simply had not understood the depth and seriousness of Silvestri's love, a feeling too lofty for her; a height, an air, which she was incapable of breathing. She had said she was offended because she thought that a lady, in such circumstances, must appear to be offended. She had laughed raucously and not hesitated to reprove Silvestri in my presence for fear that I should suspect some connivance between them, and that Almagià might, in some way, be informed; she was ignorant of friendship, as she was of love; a poor soul without light or any glimmer of essential values; a creature born

and bred in a crude and corrupt ambiance, probably the slums of Algiers or Marseilles, if not worse; a dancer in some cabaret where Almagià might have found her during his stay in France, before being sent to Piedmont at the liberation. I did not believe the story of the wedding in America. By now I had quite definite ideas about the relations between Aurora and Almagià.

It was very difficult to say all this to Silvestri, that evening. And yet I said it, hoping that he would think it over in the quiet of Olcenengo, and end by understanding.

Silvestri did not return to Rome until many months later, in December. I had continued to see the Almagiàs, if only because I had business dealings with him. Aurora had not, naturally, kept her promise; she had told her husband something about Silvestri's declaration. Almagià, who knew his woman well, had not felt betrayed or offended. He had taken the matter as a joke, in fact almost with a touch of sympathy for Silvestri. 'Silvestri! The most harmless, the only really pure man I've ever met in my life! I'd confide a million to him without a moment's fear. Much more than a wife!' Such were the phrases, and others of the kind, he used in Aurora's presence. And he blamed her for not having been able to understand Silvestri, for not having been gentler and kinder to him. 'One

mustn't formalize,' he explained to Aurora, who was listening attentively like a pupil. 'Diplomacy is the art of listening. One mustn't just listen to words, but to the person who's using them. Now I'm sure of Silvestri, it's as if he'd recited a poem, composed by himself, on your beauty. I can almost hear him!'

And so when Silvestri returned to Rome he was at once invited to dinner by the Almagiàs, and all seemed to have ended well.

Three years passed. Silvestri was now living at Olcenengo; but he often came to Rome without warning me, sometimes even without seeing me, and went to an hotel. He was still in love with Aurora. We seldom spoke about it; but the few hints that escaped him were enough. He came to Rome so frequently just in order to see her.^o Aurora was like a divinity whom, every now and again, he needed to contemplate, so that in the intervals of solitude and distance he could think her over, court her in his mind's eye, adore her secretly and neurotically. She was a vice, in fact, which had become necessary to his life. He had succeeded in getting a photograph from her, and kept it in his wallet.

Aurora and Almagià were usually pleased to see him but without making any great fuss. Some evenings, even, they seemed barely to tolerate him. Almagià had spoken of his stay, now far distant, in Silvestri's house;

and Aurora, out of vague curiosity, had said that she would rather like to hear some Piedmontese songs. So on one of his journeys to Rome Silvestri brought his guitar; and one evening after dinner he played and sang. I can still remember the scene. And I hope that Silvestri, carried away by the sweetness of the music and the words, did not look carefully at Aurora while he was singing, and so did not have to go through what I did. Almagià got up at the second song, lit a Havana, and plunged into an armchair behind Silvestri, from where, every now and again, he raised a bland hand to tell Aurora to keep still and be quiet. Silvestri was singing bent over the guitar, in a very faint voice, with closed eyes; and when he opened them, he fixed them as if in ecstacy, and for inspiration, on Aurora, sitting there in front of him. And he did not seem to notice that she was showing increasing signs of impatience, crossing and recrossing her legs, stubbing and lighting cigarettes, snorting and yawning:

*O dime 'n pò' bel giouvou
dal càpel bounda. . .*

The slow, sweet, pathetic melodies evoked woody valleys, limpid streams, willows rustling in Alpine breezes, villages and peasants faithful to their king, an age of faith and religion; and in the faraway deep touch of the guitar, in the subdued almost distant voice

of Silvestri, there was a rapt consciousness of those memories, a regret and almost a remorse that now, for ever, they were only memories.

No listeners more ignorant, more careless, more impious than Aurora and Almagià could be imagined. How on earth did Silvestri not notice it? He had told me that he would not have hesitated to marry Aurora, had she been free. How could he have lived with her? I think it was great luck, for him, that he died in time.

In spite of his repeated invitations, Aurora never went to Olcenengo. I am sure that it never even crossed her mind to do so.

Once, towards the end of those three years, Silvestri asked me point blank if I had not noticed some change in the Almagià ménage. For some time Ulderico had been leaving Rome more and more often and alone. He was continually flying to Paris, London, New York. He had also been in South Africa; and in Brazil, where he had gone into a new combine of colossal hotel building. Did I think Aurora was getting tired of being so neglected? Silvestri's green eyes, as he asked me this question, glittered with hope.

I replied that, in my opinion, as I thought I'd already explained clearly, Almagià's marriage was founded on reciprocal, secret, perhaps unconscious, hypocrisy; and that it would therefore last till the day when the interests of one or other of them were crossed. It was

very improbable that Aurora would ever find another man so prosperous, let alone a husband. And slightly less improbable that Almagià, now around fifty, though a fine-looking man, would find another woman—even a rich and well-educated one—who would attract and suit him as well as Aurora did.

Almagià was a deeply vain and conventional man: he would avoid any upset in his own private life till the very last. In fact he would never ask for a divorce unless forced to by Aurora's behaviour. But this behaviour was, as far as we knew, perfect. And so . . .

When I said 'perfect' I was referring to the outward form, of course. I did not mean that I had changed my opinion of Aurora's inner nature. But I would have sworn that she would always be prudent enough to avoid being caught. Then Silvestri laughed silently, as was his habit at times, throwing back his head and fixing me between half-shut lids with those green scintillating eyes of his, he murmured that he was hoping for a break-up of Almagià's marriage as a result of that hypocrisy which to me seemed to cement it. And he added that he was sure, now, that she did not love Almagià, and that the behaviour of a woman who does not love her husband can never be perfect, there is always a flaw somewhere. So Aurora would end by understanding Silvestri's affection and devotion, and—why not?—by returning it.

In fact Silvestri's romantic faith in the possibilities of a great Love was not yet shaken. Quite the contrary. It almost seemed as if he felt the accomplishment of his own dreams to be near. He hoped, expected almost, in a not too distant future, to marry Aurora!

This also I put down to his illusions, and follies, and it did not worry me as perhaps it ought to have done; I felt certain that, very soon, it would yield to reality.

Then one late afternoon on a Sunday in November of 1950—it was raining and I had stayed at home to play a game of chess with my old cook who, like all Hungarians, is a great chess-player—I heard the bell ring, and found myself facing Silvestri.

His raincoat was soaked, and he must have walked a long way. I thought, instinctively, that he had come on foot all the way from Parioli, that is from Aurora's, to me. I live on the Aventine. However, I said nothing. I knew that Alma's mother was in London; and, looking at Silvestri's distraught face, I at once imagined that he had lost his head as he had done before, and suffered a new humiliation.

'I didn't know you were in Rome. . . .' I said as I led him towards the fire to get warm.

'I arrived yesterday and am leaving tonight,' he replied shortly. He was never rude. I began to feel that something more serious than what I thought must

have happened. He was soaked through and sweating. I insisted that he should have a rest; his room, his bed, were always ready; or at least change. He refused. All he did was pull off his shoes and stretch out his toes to the fire.

‘Why didn’t you take a taxi?’

‘There wasn’t one. Sunday afternoon, the football match.’ He was silent. And I did not dare ask him anything, did not know where to begin. We sat there in silence, side by side.

‘D’you remember that time,’ he smiled suddenly with his eyes fixed on the fire, as if the fire had aroused a memory which he willingly followed, ‘that time when, after we’d so often planned it, you finally came out shooting with me? It was a day like this, in autumn, raining, it may even have been Sunday like today. . . . And we didn’t put up a thing. . . .’

‘And eventually, just so as to fire at least one shot, you killed a buzzard.’

‘Ah, yes, the buzzard. . . .’

I remembered it all well. I’d never been a shooting man and had thought of becoming one. That was my first and only attempt. But there was something I didn’t remember:

‘And the bitch . . . what was that bitch of yours called?’

‘Diana, poor Diana.’

'Ah yes,' I said, 'now I remember perfectly. How on the way back, in the dusk she wandered off and at one moment you were frightened you'd lost her. You whistled, and called, "Diana! Diana!"'

'And afterwards there was a fire like this, and we ate and drank and talked far into the night . . . first in front of the fire, and then in your room, and then in my room, and then again in your room . . . we couldn't make up our minds to go to bed. But I don't remember what we talked about.'

'About a future life,' said I, 'and the immortality of the soul. . . .'

'Yes, that's right,' replied Silvestri, half closing his eyes and almost laughing, but with an odd tone, a bitter ring much stronger than usual. 'I think we went right through the arguments, for and against. What d'you think now? It's so many years since we've dared talk of such things, the only ones, at bottom, which we ought really to care about. Perhaps during these years,' and in his voice now I even seemed to hear a note of sarcasm, 'you've had some new ideas?'

'You know quite well I haven't.'

'But you think less about it than at one time.'

It was true, and I admitted it. Silvestri said:

'We were better then, or I at least was. Much better.'

'I'm certain we weren't,' I replied. 'We only had a

hope of becoming so. We were mistaken. We were twenty.'

'Since then,' insisted Silvestri, 'my life has got steadily worse. No hope of its getting any better. Look here, I've reached a point I could never have imagined. I didn't think I was capable. . . .'

'Capable of what? Of suffering?' I wanted to know, not from curiosity, but because it might relieve him to talk about what was torturing him. 'Suffering isn't a worsening; quite the opposite. . . .'

'Old tales,' replied he.

'And yet if one's conscience recognizes an evil it's a sign that, in a way, one's getting out of it.' I was thinking, naturally, of Aurora; wondering whether he had finally understood, and was about to heal.

'Tales, I tell you! Conscience! You make me laugh with your conscience. . . . When you realize you've made a mistake, a mistake about everything, from top to bottom, and that it's too late, there's no remedy, and it's all been your own fault . . . oh, I swear it's better not to have any conscience then!'

At this point I hesitated no longer and asked:

'Aurora? You've seen her? Today?'

'Yes,' he replied simply. 'It's all over, I think I'll never see her again.'

The sudden news should have made me happy for him. But by his flat dead tone I realized that it

was not really good news for him, at least for the moment.

'Remember,' I said, after wondering a moment how best to console him, 'remember you're not to blame in any way, except for your own goodness. . . .'

'Don't talk nonsense!'

'Yes, for your own goodness. You just made a mistake about the person you gave your love to. But that love in itself is a very beautiful thing. You should feel proud of all you felt. Now, right at the moment, I can see, it's too early; but you'll write a book about it, eventually, I'm sure!'

'Look, you're making me laugh, and I don't want to laugh. . . .'

'You must just let a little time pass now. Why not go to Paris?' I even offered to lend him some money, if that would help. He refused firmly. He put his shoes on again to leave, and refused to stay to dinner, refused even to let me accompany him to the station, as I always used to. Then his face suddenly lit up and he said:

'I'm expecting you at Olcenengo for Christmas. I've had stoves put in everywhere, so you won't be cold. Promise to come?'

I promised, and it was this friendly invitation that persuaded me then that his state of mind was not as desperate as I'd thought. I'd better not insist, not try to comfort him any more, just let him go.

On the doorstep I said:

'The only real evil is hypocrisy, so many people have it towards themselves; it's the only real evil that can rot and ruin a life. But you, you're not one of those people. So try and be calm.'

He turned on me suddenly:

'You're talking of yourself,' said he, fixing me with his half-closed eyes as if he despised and almost hated me; and suddenly he burst out laughing, a convulsed, agonized, wicked laugh, which seemed directed straight at me.

Silvestri knew. A few years before, I'd given up a woman I loved, out of pity for another woman whom I didn't love. Oh, false pity! I gave her up from selfishness; for the one I did not love, didn't love me either and would always leave me free; while the other returned my affection and would have tied me up for life. Eventually I lost them both.

Silvestri knew. But why, for the first time now, did he seem to be reproving me, and so resentfully? What was the meaning of that laugh, of almost diabolic triumph, that was so unlike him? I did not understand, and told him so.

He looked embarrassed, and went on grimacing in silence, as if to himself. Then, hesitating, he replied in a low voice:

'You've told me that I'm not a hypocrite like you,

and that I must be calm. There, I can assure you I'm quite calm. I haven't any of your remorse, my lad. Haven't you realized I've crossed the Rubicon?

• My lad? Was this Silvestri talking to me like that?

'What d'you mean by "crossing the Rubicon"?'

'Nothing, I'm sorry,' he said more calmly, looking at me again, now with his usual gentle expression: and with his usual melancholy smile he ended: 'I only wanted to say that I've been worse than you. For you have at least believed in yourself. I don't do even that. . . .'

I warned him not to drink and told him to look after himself. We embraced. For another second, through the glass of the elevator, I glimpsed his face smiling at me affectionately.

Then I never saw him again.

That night, at the time his train was due out, thinking over the saddest of the phrases he had used to me a few hours before, I had a kind of impulse to go to the station. But it was raining, I'd already put the car in the garage, friendship in fact was defeated by laziness.

A fortnight later Silvestri was dead. A fatal attack of his disease. When I think a bottle of whisky was enough to kill him, I can't give myself peace. Who knows, if I'd gone to the station that night. . . .



AURORA WAS SITTING at table facing me, the bearded man between us. Through the two little squares of window behind her I could see the ski-ing fields, till now deserted in the sun, slowly filling up again.

We two had finished lunch. A strange lunch. The words murmured by Aurora seemed more and more absurd as I thought them over. How could he, poor old Silvestri, have been the cause of her divorce from Almagià? I remembered that the spring after Silvestri's death Almagià had left, together with Aurora, to settle in Brazil. Possibly, though I must say I thought it very improbable, there had been a real affair between Aurora and Silvestri, which Almagià might have discovered in Brazil a few months after Silvestri's death, and considered sufficiently serious to divorce her for. That was the only conjecture I'd made. But it didn't seem really likely.

From those first words of Aurora's murmured hurriedly in the shop while the bearded man was shutting the window, and then from her conversation

at table, her complaints, the loathing she kept on saying she felt for the mountains, the snow, the shop, for the life here, from all this I saw she was unhappy in her present situation and bitterly regretting the days of Rome. I realized that she had not agreed to the divorce; Alm'agià had certainly had the legal means to impose it on her. In fact there was some underlying mystery, and Silvestri was in some way linked to this mystery.

On the other hand Aurora must have been even more eager to talk about it than I was curious to listen. She had been attentive, almost affectionate, during lunch, and more than once tried to persuade me to remain at Montgenèvre until the next day, or at least until that evening; and as she insisted she looked at me; and that fixed gleam of hers had a definite meaning this time, for it was accompanied by a nervous little laugh. Of course, if I stayed, the bearded man would not be present all the time so she'd be able to talk! That is what Aurora meant to tell me by that look, that laugh.

Now I could quite well put off getting to Saint-Raphaël, to Dogliotti's, till next evening. But I confess that as I realized how much Aurora wanted to be alone with me, I began to fear a tiresome complication. The bearded man's manner had something off-hand, almost threatening about it. He kept on getting

up from table, it's true, to take the dishes into the kitchen, and change our plates himself, stopping Aurora every time with an amiable little gesture as if to say, 'Leave it my dear, don't put yourself out, I'll do it.' But there was something tough about the silent way he put the empty plates, the bottle of wine, and the food down in front of us, and about the slow, heavy steps with which he moved to and fro between the little dining-room and the kitchen, even about his frame—so bulky that his head touched the ceiling and he could scarcely get through the little door, all this seemed to be reminding us that he was there, and we were not to delude ourselves that we could get down to things without him.

Then over coffee, finding that I had definitely decided to leave, the bearded man himself asked me a favour, to give him a lift as far as Grenoble, where he had something urgent to do, but communications were so bad, and the buses always so full, that he had put the journey off from day to day hoping to get a lift in some car. Of course I said yes, excusing myself that my own affairs would prevent me bringing him back too. He thanked me.

'Oh, the return doesn't matter, I can get a bus as far as Briançon. Let's hope it won't be so full. And from Briançon I can always hire a car. Getting into a crowded bus with my size is torture for myself and

others. Now if you'll just allow me ten minutes, I'll go up and change.'

'Oh, hire a car, will you? Waste more money! We're so rich, aren't we? Our business is going so well, isn't it? We can even do that, can we?' muttered Aurora bitterly without taking the cigarette from her lips, as he was slowly mounting the wooden steps, making the whole house creak.

He stopped suddenly to reply, but spoke without turning or bending down as if it was too much of an effort, and with half his body hidden on the floor above:

'Aurò, firstly, a thousand francs won't make all that difference. And then, if I go as far as Grenoble with our friend's car we'll be saving money won't we?'

Aurora did not reply, and after a second he went on up the stairs.

Aurora and I remained in silence in the warm little room, in the air impregnated with smells of food. From the room above we could hear the bearded man's heavy tread. Aurora smoked, kept her eyes down, and tapped her foot impatiently. I looked at her. How changed she was! But I'd have said she was more beautiful, or at least her beauty was more human. She was slightly fatter, and slightly older of course. But for one so tall, the fuller, less angular lines seemed an improvement they conferred on her a

gentleness, no doubt only in appearance, but it was a feminine and maternal appearance that years before she had completely lacked. The slightly shadowed skin under her eyes, and her expression, no longer so sure, spoke of disappointments, suffering. Who knows, I could not prevent myself thinking: if Silvestri were still alive, perhaps Aurora would now be fit to understand him. Or perhaps that was just an illusion of mine, due to an odd sensation which I'd hidden from myself for years, and the violence of which I realized only now: my dislike of Almagià. I must make it clear that I'd never found Almagià particularly sympathetic: but from the very fact that he was a client of mine, and paid his bills regularly, I had avoided making any considered judgment on him. Now suddenly, I found it pleased me to hear Aurora was divorced from him; it was easy to persuade myself that I found her more human. Even the bearded man seemed to me preferable to Almagià; his uncouthness was, in a way, mysterious, suffering, enclosed. Infinitely better than the uncouthness of Almagià, flashy, self-satisfied, over-gilt.

'Why, Aurora,' I asked after a minute or two of silence, referring to her last remarks to the bearded man, 'isn't business going well here? I thought with all these skiers . . .'

'Oh, drop it, Peyrani. . . . The French are mean.

They buy everything in Paris before they leave. And even if they forget something, they'd prefer to freeze rather than spend a franc more for an article than they would in Paris. And yet I swear I don't make them pay any more. It's been a bad speculation. I had to give a huge price to take over the shop as a tenant and now it's going badly.'

'But how did it happen, Aurora?'

She rose, went to the little stairs, looked up and then came close to me, so close that I felt her breath and scent; and she murmured, gazing at me seriously:

'If you can't stop, it's no use. I must explain it all, tell it all. I need you, don't you realize that?'

'Yes, I realized that, Aurora; then I thought to myself—Stop? Just like that? Without any sure chance of being alone a bit so as to speak freely. . . .' and so saying I looked up towards the door of the little stairs.

'You can do something for me if you want to!' insisted Aurora without taking her eyes from mine.

'I don't know about that,' I said, very uncertainly and cautiously. 'Why not write to me? Or let's fix an appointment? If you haven't a chance of coming to Rome, let's arrange to meet in Nice, now, on my return journey from Saint-Raphaël. Or if things don't take too long there, I could even try to pass by here on my way back. . . .'

I was curious but wanted meanwhile to avoid any immediate bother; that's why I made a half promise to return. She seized my arm in her hand, and squeezed it so that she almost made me feel her nails.

'There is a way, Peyrani. Romolo feels stifled on the bus, he can't breathe. He's ill you know. That's why he has to go to Grenoble. For an X-ray. When he comes down now, you tell him that you've decided to stay till tomorrow morning, and lend him the car. He'll go straight off and be back tonight. Don't worry about the car—he's a very good driver.'

'Is he jealous?' I asked, still uncertain whether to agree or not.

'No,' replied Aurora, coming close to my ear. 'He's ill, that's why we live at six thousand feet. All that worries him is his health.'

'All right,' I murmured; 'but suppose he doesn't accept?'

'He'll accept,' said Aurora, more with her eyes than her lips. She moved away from me just in time, as the door from the stairs opened and Romolo appeared, dressed for town.

It was Aurora herself, luckily, who told him the new plan and to my surprise the man's face lit up with gratitude. It was the first time he had smiled since he'd seen me entering the shop. Something sweet and infantile appeared on his massive face, in his sad eyes.

The scarlet cheeks, framed in thick hair, seemed to quiver.

'Don't worry, I drive quite well. Now don't worry. I know the road. Oh yes, I've had an international driving licence for twenty years, since I was a boy. Look!' He pulled the licence out of his trouser pocket and showed it to me.

I didn't want to look, but saw all the same, in a second, the photograph of him without a beard when he was younger and not yet ill; a perfect classic face, a pair of gentle, astute, lively eyes.

We went to the car; I took out my bags and dropped them opposite at the Hotel du Col, where I took a room. Romolo insisted on carrying them himself and kept on thanking me again and again. At the last moment, before leaving, when he was already at the wheel, he said to me:

'Keep Aurora company, won't you? Give her some really good legal advice.'

'About what?' I said, genuinely surprised.

'Oh well, we're in a bad hole, Sor Avvocato.'

I pretended not to understand; then he explained:

'The shop isn't going well. Aurora isn't used to it, of course, poor girl. She's been a lady for years. . . . I've got chest trouble, and she puts up with being here just for me; if only I could think of something. Sor Avvocato, if you have any idea, any suggestions. . . .'

and he left the phrase in suspense, giving me a shrewd look, as if he wanted to make a suggestion rather than ask for one. He continued: 'We can't go on like this; it's hell. Aurora needs a change, to get away from here a bit, take a little trip . . . you suggest something. Meanwhile I can stay here in the shop; one is more than enough to cope.'

'I'll tell her. . . .' I was replying, noticing however that there was an objection, and an obvious one, to this, but I hesitated a second before saying it.

'If you're in financial difficulties though, where's Aurora going to find the money to travel?'

'That's nothing,' he explained without looking at me. 'She's any number of friends who've invited her to spend the winter at Capri, Taormina, where she likes . . . She just has to make up her mind!'

And with these words he moved off, leaving me more surprised than ever. I at once repeated all this to Aurora, adding that I couldn't understand why Romolo had changed so much when he'd heard I was staying and lending him the car; his sudden warmth, cordiality and gush of talk.

Aurora seemed very much put out. She swore under her breath, in French. Then she said, 'One must be sorry for him. He's ill and doesn't know if he'll ever get better—but he's sharp, oh yes, he's sharp! He already knew all about you; I've so often mentioned

your name; Ulderico's friend, his lawyer. And today at table he realized I wanted to talk to you. But he tried to prevent it, out of fear.'

'What fear?'

'Of hospital. He doesn't want to go to one. He's afraid I'm going to dump him there.'

'And would you, Aurora?'

'Not like that. But, if things get worse here, if I'm forced to . . .'

'D'you love him?'

'I did for years. I met him first before Ulderico, and when people have loved each other so long there's always a tie. Now, frankly, I don't need him any more. But I can't bear to leave him in this state. At least I'd like to leave him well; help him anyway at first. He's not a bad man. He's sly, though, he's a liar. He had to have this X-ray, which meant getting to Grenoble, which is very uncomfortable without a car, particularly for him. Now he either had to take this chance or leave it: so he began acting, putting himself out to be nice to you, as if it was he who'd first thought of my asking your advice. Me in need of a change? little trip? If only that was all! No, I have no friends who've invited me. The truth is that we're on the verge of bankruptcy, Peyrani. We have to pay last year's rent by the end of March. That's half a million francs. And every month the bills come in, I had to

get the stock on credit; fifty, seventy-five, a hundred thousand lire every month. In winter we do a bit of business here, and manage to set aside two fifty thousand, not more. As you see it's not even enough for the rent. And we have to go on living, eating, dressing, both of us; then there are medicines and doctors' bills for him. That's our situation. A little trip, indeed! The only person who can help me is you!

'Me?' said I, amazed by the simplicity with which Aurora turned to me. It had already occurred to me that she might ask me for some financial help; but I was expecting her to set about this rather more ambiguously. I had told myself that I wouldn't yield to her seductions, yet would still help her, in memory of Silvestri. But she explained:

'Yes, only you can write to Ulderico and ask him—not to forgive me but to send me some money, what'd be only a small sum for him and would mean a year's living for me. And that's why . . . I'm not religious, Avvocato, and yet when I came down and found you there in the shop I thanked Our Lady for having sent you!'

'Write to Ulderico? You know him better than I do. . . . Just think it over. You went off with another man and divorced him. Now, five years later, you're still living with this man and yet you hope Ulderico will help you?'

'We weren't divorced because of Romolo. Ulderico never even knew Romolo existed. He may have heard of course, by now, that I've been living with him for the last five years. But that's only natural; after all, he couldn't expect me to become a nun! So he'd think I met Romolo afterwards. No, we divorced because of Silvestri; just cursed bad luck! Because there was never anything between Silvestri and me, or hardly anything.'

'And yet,' I observed, 'there must have been something, if Almagià wanted a divorce!'

Aurora was silent a minute. I was in the dining-room, sitting over a cup of coffee and a glass of brandy. She was moving about nervously; glancing every now and again through the door, the curtain of which she had left open, to see if a customer had come into the shop.

She came back towards me; moved up to me, and after a second's hesitation finally said, with a slight smile:

'There's something . . . I may as well tell you now . . . otherwise you wouldn't be able to understand. Almagià and I were never married. At the end of the war I was at Nice. We met there. When Almagià went to Rome, he wanted me to go with him; but I refused at first. He insisted. He went on and on until I said to him, 'All right, I'll come with you, but on one

condition, that you introduce me to everyone, everyone, whoever they are, including your closest friends, as your wife.' We decided to say we'd been married three years before in New York. Yes, I knew New York; I'd been there before the war when I was seventeen; I was a model, then, at Schiaparelli's. That's why I never put a foot wrong socially. I didn't do badly, did I?'

The first veil fell. The oddness which I'd always sensed in the relationship between Aurora and Almagià was odd no longer. And everything explained itself; obviously, Aurora's submission and prudence had been due to fear of losing what her lover gave her; ease, luxury, admission to the elect world of Via Veneto. Almagià had been her absolute master, free to rid himself of her whenever it suited him, at any moment when it would do the least damage to his vanity—a moment which came as his business expanded and he decided to emigrate.

'Didn't Silvestri know it either?' I asked Aurora.

'No, unfortunately, not even him. If he had, I wouldn't be in this mess now. Before I met Almagià, I had a friend, Romolo. He was a producer, or rather, for he was very young then, an assistant producer of revues, variety. He used to travel abroad, to London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, engaging numbers. Little dancing girls and so on. He'd offer them contracts and

bring them to Milan on behalf of someone whose name I forget now. After being a mannequin, I'd become a dancer. We met at Charleroi. Each one-night stand with that company was worse than the last, all in little towns. But I got the best pay I'd ever had, a thousand francs a week, a lot then. With Romolo, as soon as we met, as soon as we saw each other it was . . . you know those things that happen only once in a lifetime? Those things which turn the world upside down? He was supposed to be back in Milan a day or two later. But he stayed on in Belgium a month—the whole time the company was there. Then we were to open in Amsterdam; but there was already a threat of invasion, and the tour was cancelled or changed, at the last moment, to Marseilles. Romolo said to me, "Come away with me, I'll take you to Milan; I've fixed a contract for you, not such a good one, but it's certain. And then you can come on to Rome to my place. In Italy you'll find any amount of engagements." I was a bit undecided: then I said, "Don't let's throw money away. Let me just do Marseilles. Come with me." I was getting very good pay, as I said; I was singing and dancing in a solo number. So I could help with his expenses. We were madly in love; he agreed in the end and came on to Marseilles. Just as we got there war with Italy broke out. He just had time to catch the last train to Ventimiglia,

if not he'd have been stuck in France. So for three years we never saw each other, and had no news. But he was in my heart. And I in his. Well, Avvocato, there you are, fate! If it hadn't been for the war we'd have been all right. Why not? We might have married and even had children

'But that war! My father, mother and an aunt, all of whom I had to keep, were in Paris. All three too old to work. Before the collapse I took them down to Nice, rented a small apartment, and we all lived together. But I was the only person bringing any money in.

'People call it "a giv life", I suppose because one has to smile at everyone, be kind to everyone. I can assure you it isn't. Particularly doing it in style, taking care always to be in some places and never in others, and watching out in case one's cheated, so as to make one's body pay, pay as much as possible, I swear it's a hard, bad, difficult life.'

For the first time Aurora was being sincere with me. She was doing it on purpose, of course, with an aim in view. She'd realized that telling me the truth was the best way to move me. But there was no question of her lying or producing a sob-story just to humiliate herself in my eyes. Her words, her rough common tone, had the fatalism and emotion, conventional yet sincere, which direct the lives and consciences of many women of her type.

At that moment a skier entered the shop. Aurora moved to serve him. I looked at her through the door, leaning over the counter as she talked to the customer, and seemed to see her for the first time. This, I said to myself, is Aurora as she really is; much more sympathetic and much more interesting now than the other, the false lady and the mysterious vamp.

Even her clothes, for the first time since the exotic garments I remembered at that period in Rome, were not chosen to show her off or to excite others. She hadn't changed since that morning. A black sweater with sleeves rolled up above the elbows. Black trousers. High-heeled shoes. A serious mistake, that, Almagià would have said. With trousers a lady always wears flat shoes or sandals, with no heels or very low ones. But I even liked ~~this~~ mistake. There was no longer anything of the lady ~~about~~ her! Just an ordinary woman who had mistaken her life, like so many other women. And like so many men, myself included.



'HALF AN HOUR on horseback every morning and half an hour's tennis every afternoon,' said Aurora, coming back into the little room and sitting down beside me. 'On Saturdays and Sundays, golf. Never more than one whisky a day. Very few cigarettes, and Egyptian ones at that. Great care not to sweat, not to catch cold, not to overdo things. Bed at midnight, or one o'clock at the latest; interests—money and business. Start work on the dot, stop on the dot. Never get excited. A fortnight a year at Montecatini. A fortnight at Ischia for the mud cure. Tepid baths by thermometer. Face and body massage. And love; love, of course, a drop at a time. . . . He'll probably die before any of the others; a sudden stroke, I can just see it. But meanwhile do you know Ulderico's age?'

'Mine, more or less,' I replied, laughing. 'Fifty.'

'He kept it secret, like a *prima donna*! He's six more, my dear Peyraia, fifty-six now! He lives like a watch. I've given you the idea, haven't I? That's why we all made a mistake. And eighteen years older than me! Well, I came to Rome at the end of '45; so tot it up.

He was forty-six, I twenty-eight. Eighteen years difference is a lot, for a young woman. And I still can't understand what way he loved me. He did so little about it! Nowadays I sometimes ask myself: was he ever really in love? A bit perhaps at Nice, those first days, during the war. But as soon as we began living together in Rome . . . it wasn't love, then; it was—how shall I put it? Vanity. The pleasure of having me there with him, subject to him, doing all he wanted, going where he wanted, seeing who he wanted. Every night I'd tell him exactly what I'd done all day and he'd give me my programme for the next. And all the sermons and instructions I had to listen to, all the precise, meticulous details—my God, what a bore!

'Yes, I'd guessed that,' I said, 'but, Aurora, how on earth did you put up with it?'

'Well, you know, when I agreed to come to Rome, I'd no idea he'd be like that. I agreed because in every other way his offer seemed a dream, my ideal! Just think, not to worry about the future any more; to be able to send a nice big cheque home regularly every month; whenever I fancied a dress, a pair of shoes, a bag, a fur, a jewel, to be able to buy it, and with a light heart too, without a regret, without feeling I was being silly.... Of course he had to approve everything I bought; but I can't really complain about that, our tastes nearly always agreed. I told you I was at Schiaparelli's

and had lived in Paris; I've got taste, natural taste. And then to live in Rome, see only smart, well-groomed people. A home in Parioli, going out to Via Veneto, Fregene, Capri, Taormina. What more could I want? So I swallowed his ways, his company, his sermons, the ironic smile he always had ready, everything, everything. I had to pay him back some way, hadn't I?

'There was another way, a much more important way you could have paid him back,' I observed. 'By showing him affection.'

'Showing affection, according to him, consisted in obeying him like a slave, while pretending with everyone else to be a real lady, a real wife. That's all. Nothing else was of any importance, I can assure you. It just didn't exist.'

'But you must have felt the lack yourself?'

'The lack? I don't think so. At least, not at first, I'm sure. Ulderico wasn't the man of my dreams. He wasn't even the man I'd thought he was when I left Nice. He was a disappointment all along the line. A nag, a bore, a weight on my neck. But he gave me the kind of life I'd always wanted to live, the one I thought I had a right to. Now it's more than ten years later and we're seeing things from another angle. But I assure you that then, for me, to enter that house of ours in Via Tre Madonne, with its lovely garden, a

white poodle frisking round . . . a chauffeur, a maid, a cook; I could stay in bed all morning if I felt like it, or get up at ten and go for a drive if I'd not been up late the night before; compare the calm and pleasures of that life with the one I'd led for years in the south of France! All I had to do was not to think too much or expect anything more. Affection? D'you think those other men had given me affection? Had they expected any from me? I know I didn't reason things out then at all. Ulderico bored me; but he gave me such a lot. No, I felt no need for affection those first months.'

'Then?'

'Then, we'd have gone on like that, I think, if it wasn't for what happened.'

'Which had to happen one way or other, Aurora! Because, in spite of everything, you weren't happy with Almagià.' Instinctively I was longing to prove that Almagià was odious, that he could never be loved.

'That's not true,' replied Aurora. 'I was happy. I would have been happy. If it hadn't been for fate, destiny, call it what you like. I'd have signed along the dotted line quite willingly, sworn never to touch another man. Not that I didn't feel a bit sexy now and again. I'm a woman, after all. But I'd got wise about that, by then. I no longer attached much importance to that particular feeling. I could perfectly well do without

it, I thought. Or rather, I'd only be unfaithful to Almagià if I was absolutely sure he'd never get to know and particularly if there was no chance whatsoever of any complications. Better nothing at all than any kind of an affair, in fact. Instead of which I must have had a curse on me. . . . I was careless, just once. And there was a witness, just one. Silvestri. He was my curse!

'Don't use such words, Aurora,' I exclaimed irritably. 'Silvestri was such a good man.'

'Good!? Don't make me laugh. Listen, I'd decided not to be unfaithful to Ulderico for all the gold in the world. Or if I did to take so many precautions it'd have been as good as not betraying him at all. D'you know, for instance, the real reason why I'd insisted, before leaving Nice and coming to Rome, on his introducing me to everyone as his wife? So that if I did happen to meet Romolo he would think that I was married and so we couldn't start again. Fate, of course, there, too. Of all the men I'd met, Romolo was the only one with whom things had been different. The only one I didn't feel really strong with. Then fate brought me right to his own city. At Nice I still had a piece of paper on which he'd written his address. I tore it up before leaving, without looking at it, so as to have no temptations. And once in Rome I lived perfectly happily for months without Romolo ever coming into

my mind at all. Once, at the corner of a street, I saw a policeman directing traffic who looked a bit like him; tall and heavily built, with one of those ancient Roman's faces, you know the type. Then I did think of him, of course. And it was strange really, I said to myself, we'd never run into each other: Via Veneto, a couple of theatres, a few big cinemas, Rome's not Paris. Then I thought: oh well, what with the war, who knows? Perhaps he doesn't live in Rome any more, that's all.

'Then, one fine morning, or perhaps I ought to say one bad morning, I was strolling along Via Condotti looking into the shop-windows, when I heard a whisper behind me: "Aurora". I turned, there he was. He looked gay, young, handsome, well turned out. As if things were going well. I was very pleased to see him. Thinking me just the same as before, he tried to kiss me at once, without any particular intentions, like two old friends meeting again. I refused to, of course, and at once told him everything, or what I thought was best; that I was married and in love with my husband and that we mustn't meet again. "We can meet as acquaintances," he insisted. "Introduce me to your husband." "Quite impossible," I said, really meaning it. "never!" He looked hurt. "That's life," I said. "One's got to put up with it, now let's say good-bye." As he was shaking my hand he suddenly asked

if I'd like some tickets for the first night of the new revue at the Sistina. What was my name now; my address? "I'm only just passing through Rome with my husband," I said. "My husband's American and we're at an hotel." I thanked him for thinking of the tickets, but said we were probably off the day after next. So we left each other. For ever, I thought.'

'Was it . . . sad to leave him for ever?' I asked. I wanted to find out if Aurora had ever been capable of real love, if only for one moment in her life.

'Sad, sad . . . what d'you expect me to say, Peyrani? It wasn't a pleasure, of course. I may have heaved a sigh. Then I went into Bulgari, the jeweller, and got three bracelets to take home on approval, so that I could choose one with Ulderico, who'd said he wanted to give me a present. I soon consoled myself, you see.'

'But didn't you *feel* anything at seeing Romolo again like that?'

'Oh yes, of course. I felt I'd very much like to be with him, like before. But I pulled myself up when I realized it would be more dangerous with him than with anyone else.'

'What happened next, then?'

'That first night at the Sistina. Ulderico had already taken tickets for it—he always did things without consulting me. I said I didn't feel well. No, it's all

arranged, he says, there's no changing it. It doesn't matter, really, I thought; if Romolo sees me, all the better, he'll see me with my husband; and surely after what I told him he won't dare come up to me. Romolo, in fact, was standing in the foyer, near the box-office. He sees me, we see each other, and pretend we don't. During the interval I stay in my stall with Ulderico; and Romolo comes and stands in the gangway, to stare at me. I notice him talking to someone beside him. Ulderico knows everyone in Rome, he's greeting people to left and right, friends, bankers, politicians. And I realize at once that Romolo's finding out who Ulderico is. It was a worry; but there was nothing I could do about it.'

'Was Romolo in love?'

Aurora snorted and said with some irritation:

'In love! You keep on asking such silly questions. Of course he was in love. How does that change things? He was determined to see me again, and so wanted to find out who my husband was. He heard in the end, even the details. Because a week later Ulderico went off to Milan for only three days; and Romolo telephoned that very morning.'

'How did you take that?'

'Ulderico had been an absolute pest the night before. Silvestri was at dinner. He'd just come down from the country and we were beginning to see him again.'

D'you remember that ridiculous afternoon when he got ill and had to leave Rome, and came to say good-bye with you, and as soon as you'd gone off to telephone, went down on his knees to me and told me he couldn't live without me, and so on?'

'I do indeed remember.'

'Of course I told Almagià all about that. But he just burst out laughing. Everyone made him jealous, even the chauffeur, there was a row if I said a word to him beyond good morning or good evening or necessary orders. But Silvestri never, he was the only one that never worried Almagià at all. Everything was allowed Silvestri. Why, Almagià used even to rebuke me at times for not being nice enough to him.'

'He knew Silvestri was harmless.'

'He was wrong. But Ulderico didn't even take him into account. That evening he'd been criticizing me the whole of dinner, making little satirical remarks, humiliating me as he did when we were alone. Then he got Silvestri to go to the station with him and wouldn't let me come too, my hair was untidy he said, and there'd be some members of parliament in the sleeping-car, friends he wanted to make a good impression on. Imagine, my hair untidy! I used to go to Attilio's three times a week! So I stayed at home infuriated. And I remember I couldn't get off to sleep. In the morning, while I was still in bed and hadn't even

had coffee, the maid knocked: "There's a gentleman on the telephone. He asked for the Signore; I told him he was out of Rome, and now he says he wants to talk to you." Thinking it might be something tiresome I told her to ask for his name and what he wanted. Off the maid went, and came back with: "It's Signor Pollastrini," she said, that's all.

'I shouldn't have done it, I know. But I felt so cosy in my lovely bed, with the sun pouring through the half-open window, I could see a patch of garden, hear the raking of gravel, and felt so happy, except for somewhere inside me, a little core of anger against Ulderico; at the way he'd treated me, the way he was, would always be. Oh, for a word of consolation, or not even that; to hear another voice a moment, a voice saying something pleasant; a voice above all that wasn't Ulderico's, which was still ringing in my ears from the night before, nasal, drawling, endlessly preaching and sneering. . . .

'All Romolo said was: "That you, Aurò? You'll find my name and address in the telephone book under Pollastrini Romolo. I'm always in, from three in the morning till midday. I live alone, in a little place by myself. I just wanted you to know. Do whatever you like. I've never stopped thinking of you, Aurò. But if you don't contact me, I'll never bother you again."

'That's all he said. I didn't say a word myself, didn't blame him for telephoning, didn't ask him how he'd got my number, nothing. I just put down the receiver and began thinking. D'you know how long I went on thinking, Peyrani?'

'Five minutes,' I said, laughing. 'You went straight off to him.'

'Six months. Six months later. When Ulderico was on his first trip to New York. Till then he'd never been away more than four or five days at most; and if he went to Paris or London he'd sometimes take me.

'Ulderico was to stay in New York three weeks. It was the beginning of July, or the end of June. I could have gone to Portofino, to some friends of Ulderico's, who'd invited me. But I didn't want to, for two reasons. First, because I knew I'd only been invited as Ulderico's wife; and to go without him frightened me a bit, I had to admit. Secondly, because if I did go I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid, not scandal exactly, but petty vexations. You've never seen me in bathing-dress, have you? You must believe me when I tell you, not that I'm particularly proud of it, but it happens to be true—and you can see where my beauty's brought me.—Anyway, you must believe me when I say bathing-dress particularly suits me. Or rather, it did then. All those girls in Ulderico's set, the smartest

in Rome, I outclassed the lot! In figure, line, carriage! Film-producers, directors, all came crowding round. Film-tests, parts, were always being offered; Almagià, of course, wouldn't hear of such a thing. He loathed film people. Well, with all that success, you can imagine the envy, the hatred, of all those other girls. Not really girls, of course; they were all ladies, married and unmarried, with lots in the bank, titles and estates. And their menfolk, whether married or not, seeing me on the beach every day or out dancing in the evening, and knowing Ulderico was in New York, would be bound to try and start an affair with me. Not that they'd have succeeded, mind you, I know how to defend myself! But it was a bore! And the gossip!

'So I'd stayed in Rome in the heat. And didn't even go to Ostia or Fregene, for the same reasons. Instead I'd drive out in the car every morning as far as Villa Glori and take a stroll with the dog; then drive back to Piazza di Spagna, to Attilio's or some shop. I'd get home about half past one, have lunch, and a nap; then came the great problem; what to do till dinner-time? And after dinner? It was out of season for films. And then, I can assure you, even if I dressed quietly, with sleeves and a high collar, going to the cinema alone was torture too. It might have been my height or my figure, slim and different from Roman and

Italian women, anyway I was never left in peace. There seem to be hundreds of idle young men in Rome; or perhaps they do it as a living; particularly in summer. "You American?"—They took me for an American. Two or three times I'd not been able to get rid of them, and had to call the manager. So I preferred staying at home, alone, in the evenings too. There wasn't any television then, unfortunately, or I might have held out. But the boredom! The boredom when seven o'clock came round and I'd read all the illustrated papers. The sun would go down, I'd take tea in the garden, even the dog was tired of playing; if only I'd had someone to talk to, no matter who! I'd even have been pleased to see Silvestri. But Silvestri was in the country.

'One day, a holiday, I don't remember which, the maid and cook were out; they'd asked for the day off. I'd sent the chauffeur out with a cable for Ulderico and was alone in the house. No danger of any servants overhearing. I took up the telephone book. It wasn't the time Romolo had told me. If he's not in, I thought, all the better. Let fate decide.

'He was in. We made an appointment for ten that night, in front of the Supercinema. I went out at nine, in the Cadillac; then dismissed the chauffeur, too, as it was a holiday; I'd take a taxi home, I told him. At ten I came out of the cinema; there was Romolo. "I just

felt like a little chat, that's all." He had a small car; we went to Castelfugano.

'But we never said a word during the drive, either of us. Then the pines, the sea, the night, the stars; sitting in silence, by someone I knew, a nice boy. . . . It was like heaving a long deep sigh. I was happy.'

'A sigh of liberation from Almagià?' said I, feeling quite pleased myself. 'How I understand. But, anyway, it was love. Or am I mistaken?'

'Love? What do I know? Yes, of course, it must have been love. But that's not what I want to talk about. From that night I began to meet Romolo quite often and quite regularly. But always secretly, and taking, every time, all possible imaginable precautions, so as to leave nothing to chance. For instance, we were never so careless again as to go driving, and sit out in the open, like two children.' I went to him, to his place. But always for a very short time, and making long detours beforehand, to the dentist's, the hair-dresser's, the dressmaker's, the vet's with the dog . . . if anyone had seen me I always had a perfect alibi ready to produce to Ulderico. But there was never any need.

'The most difficult part, as I used the Cadillac, was deceiving the chauffeur. And even with him, I took the greatest care every time. Parking difficulties, shopping I had to do, in the centre of town. on foot: I used

always to ask him to fetch me somewhere far from where Romolo lived. The chauffeur, the maid, the cook, the gardener; they'd all been chosen by Ulderico. But they liked me; more than they did him, anyway. It would have been silly to take too many risks, though. Once, many months before, the maid had heard Romolo's name on the telephone. Unfortunately it's one of those names that are difficult to forget. Pollastrini. I told Romolo he must never telephone again. I'd ring up from outside, from some bar. Sometimes, though, that wasn't enough. Romolo, too, had his own life, his variety shows; he didn't go abroad any more, but often to Milan. So we agreed that if by any chance he had to telephone me urgently he'd do so at the times Ulderico was not at home, and give the maid another name, some false name. Which? There was only one that was safe. You've already guessed what it was.'

'Silvestri?'

'Silvestri. If by any chance Almagià answered the telephone instead of the maid, Romolo was to say it was a mistake.'

'But didn't the maid know Silvestri's voice?'

'I'd taught Romolo to imitate it. Anyway, it was a trick we only used about half a dozen times in three years. Only in real cases of urgency. And it always worked. When Romolo telephoned, Ulderico was

never at home. Silvestri used to come to Rome very often and when least expected. It was all quite natural, quite perfect.'

'So,' I said ironically to Aurora, 'for those three years you were really happy weren't you? You had the way of life you liked most, and to make up for Almagià's company you had Romolo every now and again. Everything, it must have seemed—— Don't you long to go back to those days?'

'You always ask such silly questions. I don't know if I was happy. Perhaps one's never happy. One's always looking for something else. The months passed, and Ulderico, instead of improving, got worse. Bullying, boring, heavy, and now irritable too, full of nervous little tricks. He did go off on journeys, luckily; I was freed of his presence more and more often, particularly that last year. By then I was well-known all over Rome, though; and I had to be just as careful about Romolo even when Almagià was away. All that time, for instance, I'd never spent a night with Romolo. It's silly, I know. But I did so long to.'

'Love is never wrong, Aurora,' I said firmly. 'The wrong only begins when we cause another to suffer in order to make ourselves happy. Almagià is not capable of suffering, or only from his own vanity. So you did perfectly right. There's only one thing I don't

like in all you've told me till now; that use of Silvestri's name.'

'I'm not asking you if I did right or wrong. You make me feel as if I were at confession. I haven't been since I was a girl at school with the nuns. The lies I told the priest then! My father, at home, always used to say: *prêtres, moines, nonnes, ce n'est que de*. . . . No, that's not the point. I'm telling you all this just to convince you of the truth; that Almagià never knew a thing about Romolo; and so you can write and ask him to help me. You're right, though, about Silvestri's name. It brought bad luck! A bad idea! There, maybe, that was my only mistake.'

I could not imagine what had happened; and yet, I thought, life is sometimes just; and felt tempted to say so to Aurora. But was silent. If I did would she understand? Or would I seem more like a confessor than ever? 'It brought bad luck'; for her no religion, no morality even, existed; just superstitions.

I looked at her for a moment in silence. The sun had gone down suddenly, as it does in the mountains in winter; a dim blue dusk was settling over the little room. Aurora was sitting opposite me, leaning forward, in a rather graceless attitude; her legs wide apart, holding her elbows and twisting a handkerchief in her fingers. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she brusquely turned over her left wrist

and looked at her watch. She was still beautiful, still desirable, even; for me far more interesting like this than in the past.

More human? More cynical?

Or was I misjudging her? Was it I who could not see, in the murky depths of her superstitions, a first glimmer of remorse? In her wish to get things clear, to tell all, even the most sordid details, the first hint of conscience? In her anxiety to obtain a small sum of money from Almagià. . . . No, no, for her that was an important sum now; she needed money, that was all.



IN THE SILENCE she also seemed to be brooding. But what about? After looking at the little gold and diamond watch on her wrist, she had slowly taken it off and begun wrapping it carefully in tissue-paper, explaining:

‘There, you see, Peyrani, that’s the last thing of value I have left. All the rest, rings, necklaces, bracelets. . . . No, this stuff’s nothing,’ she interrupted herself, pointing to the numerous little bangles on one of her wrists. ‘Every single thing that could be sold I’ve sold in the last two years. Today an Italian Customs inspector is supposed to come who might give me a good price for the watch; the mechanism’s by Jaeger Le Coultre, one of the best makes, and then there are the diamonds. With this we can pay the ious for January and February, and also one or two from last year, which I keep on renewing. After that, though? What about the rent? And the other ious? And living? And Romolo’s medicines and X-rays?’

As she talked I kept on looking at her suspiciously, a little irritated too.

Suspicious because, well, the shop might be doing badly; but quite how badly? She was probably exaggerating. Even the story of the watch seemed dubious to me, made up on the spot. Perhaps she'd seen me glancing at her wrist in that moment of silence, and hurriedly tried to justify its presence for fear of my suspicions; and by doing so actually reinforced them.

Irritated because I found I simply could not believe entirely in Aurora; and because I'd realized, suddenly, that I'd like to believe. Her deceit didn't bother me; but I'd have preferred her to have been incapable of deceiving me in particular. Was that just vanity on my part, like Almagià's? Anyway, I began listening to her now with growing mistrust.

'In the spring of that last year, when Almagià went to Brazil, he'd arranged for me to pay my people a short visit at Nice as I hadn't seen them for years. It was a long journey, and it seemed quite natural to break it at Genoa instead of taking a sleeping-car through. So Romolo and I thought of spending a night together for the first time since the war.

'We'd taken separate rooms at the hotel. There was no danger. The disaster happened . . . ah, well, it obviously had to happen! Just listen, though.

'We went to the station each on our own, so we

shouldn't be seen together. And we met in a first-class compartment where we'd reserved two seats facing each other as far as Genoa. If there was anyone we recognized on the train, we wouldn't talk for the whole journey. We'd just look in each others' eyes every now and again, thinking of how, later that night, we'd be safe together in Genoa, locked into a room at the Bristol.

'At the station, on the train, there was no one we knew. All the same we were very cautious. We muttered some non-committal phrases, passed each other illustrated papers, looked at the landscape. In the opposite corner there was an old gentleman dozing; he must have thought we weren't travelling together at all. The tips of our shoes, or our knees, sometimes touched, even without our wanting to; that was probably the greatest pleasure I'd ever felt in my whole life. Absurd, don't you find?'

'Quite normal,' I said. 'An old story. The forbidden fruit is always the tastiest.'

'No, just the opposite. I felt for the first time since meeting Romolo again that I was living with him calmly. There I was sitting opposite him, and the minutes passed, one after the other, the quarters, the half-hour, there he still was, and I'd no worries about having to separate, about having to hide! It'd be like that if I were his wife. Why not, I said to myself then,

for the first time. If only Romolo had Almagià's money . . . oh, I wouldn't have hesitated!

'Who knows?' said I, amused by Aurora's incredible simplicity. 'If Romolo had Almagià's money, he'd probably have been different from what he was; he'd have been, very probably, like Almagià. Don't let's delude ourselves, my dear Aurora, that we have any choice between one friend and another, one town to live in and another; one wife and another; one profession and another; it's not true! We've made the choice already, beforehand, inside ourselves. Years before, sometimes on our mother's lap. Only a second before sometimes, yielding to the lightest, latest puff of wind. A terrible and simple choice between two of our feelings, two of our tastes, preferences, pleasures, call them what you like.' I stopped because I saw, by the fixed expression in Aurora's liquid eyes, that she was not following me. I began again in rather cruder terms: 'You know the story of the full barrels and the drunken wife? In fact, one can't have everything in life. One has to choose. And choose in such a way that, later, we don't complain. D'you understand?'

'Yes, yes, I understand,' exclaimed Aurora impatiently. 'I've always known that. But it's you who don't understand. There are some people who have a right to everything. I don't say now, when I'm over

thirty-five, but ten years ago, I can assure you I didn't have to do any choosing, not me! Men by the dozen, if I'd wanted them. Millions, *and* love. Both together. I was just getting to that. Then, all of a sudden, things went wrong. The evil eye, they say in Naples. Nothing else, I'm sure.

'Towards eight o'clock, after Viareggio, we got up and went along to the restaurant-car for dinner. Romolo followed me, a few steps behind; I walked ahead, between the tables, glancing round for a couple of free places. At a table for four was a man alone, at that moment reading a paper which was spread out and hiding his face. I sat down in front of him, and Romolo was just about to sit down beside me when the man lowered his paper, it was Silvestri. Silvestri, whom I'd seen only the day before and thought was still in Rome. He got up enthusiastically, and kissed my hand. I tried to warn Romolo with a glance, to let him know he was to pretend not to know me. But he didn't notice, bowed correctly towards Silvestri and said, introducing himself

' "Allow me? Silvestri."

' "Silvestri. Me too!" replied Silvestri, laughing and shaking his hand.

'Romolo laughed, very embarrassed, and blushing. I laughed too. We all three laughed. We sat down. A remedy occurred to me, the only one, Silvestri must

be made to think Romolo is only a casual acquaintance of the journey, met half an hour before. I glanced at Silvestri. Then, perhaps a bit too soon, I said, turning slightly towards Romolo:

‘“Silvestri! Are you Silvestri too? What a coincidence! You know, I didn’t catch your name when you introduced yourself just now.”’

‘Silvestri laughed, looked at me fixedly, his eyes screwed up maliciously, and said meaningly:

‘“That’s apt to happen. One never does catch names at introductions.”’

‘Then he turned to Romolo; gave another, even more meaning smile, eyes screwed up more than ever:

‘“Except this time, with us two, of course!”’

‘I felt a cold shiver down my back. It was as good as saying to Romolo; oh, young man, we understand each other!’

‘Excuse me,’ I said to Aurora, interrupting her. ‘Excuse me, but I knew Silvestri very well indeed. He might have had thousands of faults; but I can assure you that he wasn’t malicious, definitely not. That way of smiling, of talking, of screwing up his eyes were just mannerisms of his, perhaps because he was short-sighted and wouldn’t wear spectacles. I’m sure Silvestri had understood nothing, suspected nothing. He was so ingenuous. So unobservant.’

'Oh, drop it,' muttered Aurora faintly, without, obviously, being touched by the smallest doubt about Silvestri's malice, which she evidently considered deepset and constitutional. She went on:

'I felt a cold shiver, I was saying; and tried to change the subject. I noticed Silvestri was dressed for shooting, and asked him why. He said he'd got in at Viareggio. He'd left Rome the day before; and had been out shooting with friends, near Pisa, I asked him about shooting, and began listening to him as if Romolo didn't exist; as one does, I think, when one's with a person one's just met for the first time by chance and runs into another person who's a close friend. But he, who usually had such a lot to say about country life, shooting, and all that, this time cut off after a few words; and turned straight back to Romolo:

"You're not from Modena by any chance, are you?"

"No," said Romolo, who'd realized he'd made an appalling blunder and was only just beginning to pull himself together.

"There are a number of Silvestris at Modena, you know. But they're a completely different lot; I don't think we're even relations. I'm from Piedmont, so's my family. You're . . . from where, excuse my asking?"

Romolo said he was from Rome, and was quite

right to say so, as, though I've never noticed myself, being a foreigner, it seems he's got a very strong accent. Even so, Silvestri wouldn't let him alone:

“It's the first time I've ever come across a Silvestri from Rome.”

Romolo replied that actually his father came from Tuscany; that there are all sorts in Rome, nowadays; and that Silvestri seemed quite a common name in Italy. But he got tied up, insisted too much, explained too much, seemed to be trying to excuse himself. Silvestri looked at him fixedly, without losing a word, and every now and again looked at me.

I couldn't be really angry with Romolo. How can a man of his physique, his height, introduce himself by a name so like a chicken in Italian—Pollastrini? Too ridiculous. We were both sure there was no one who knew us on the train. How could he have foreseen having to introduce himself while we were together? How could we possibly have guessed that Silvestri would get on at Viareggio, straight into the restaurant-car? Taken unawares, Romolo had brought out, instead of any other, the false name we kept in reserve for cases of urgency. Fate, that's what it was.

Seeing that Silvestri was taking such insistent interest in Romolo, I realized I had to say a word or two to him myself. Otherwise my very silence might

confirm Silvestri in the suspicion . . . suspicion; for it wasn't as if he had any proofs; or at least I thought he hadn't. I asked Romolo if he was going to Turin, like Silvestri. No, only to Genoa, he replied. I said at once that I had to get out at Genoa too, but just to change trains, and go straight on that same night to Ventimiglia and Nice. I'd scarcely said this when I realized I'd made things worse. For I was almost sure our train would get to Genoa two hours after the last train had left for Ventimiglia. Oh, well, there was nothing to be done about that. I might have made a mistake looking at the time-table. During dinner I tried to start a conversation with Silvestri which would exclude Romolo. I asked him about his own countryside and the life he led there, etc. Silvestri did talk, but, every now and again he would bring in some comparison which had nothing to do with what he was saying, and mention Rome, life in Rome. Of course he was doing it on purpose, for in this way, every time, he could have a go at Romolo. "What do you think, now? Let's hear our friend from Rome here!"

'But excuse me, Aurora,' I broke out, 'it's obvious he was doing it out of kindness and nothing else. According to Silvestri, you had accepted for the journey the company of a man you didn't know. Now the presence of himself, an old friend, came between

you and excluded, almost automatically, this new and passing acquaintance. The situation was embarrassing. To make things as pleasant as possible Silvestri was trying to bring the outsider into the conversation. That's the way people in good society behave. And Silvestri had very good manners.'

In reply Aurora began laughing silently. She didn't even seem to have understood. I was about to insist and explain better. But I stopped, realizing it was wasted breath, and then smiled myself too; into my mind had come Almagià's sermons on behaviour to her. Between those and mine, I said to myself, Aurora is incapable of distinguishing; the good manners of a vain and cynical snob and the good manners of a kind soul are both the same to her!

'Very good manners, in fact!' said Aurora. 'But you ought to have seen the look' . . . the dirty look, the devilish and dirty look, with which he asked Romolo those questions, poor boy! For instance: "Now let's hear my Roman namesake's opinion."'

Devilish and dirty. I must confess that at those two words, devilish and dirty, I had, without wanting to, seen Silvestri's face, alive again in front of me, alive and as I'd never known it: like the face of an unknown with whom one has spent a long journey without ever exchanging a word and has forgotten all about, then recognizes it with revulsion, a month later, opening

the paper, in the photograph of an escaped prisoner or of a criminal. I pushed this ridiculous image away from me, pushed it away with horror and shame at having harboured it if only for a single second. And looked at Aurora again, sitting there in front of me, who had roused it by those two words of hers and who was now going on:

‘Romolo, in any case, as soon as he got over his confusion, did his best to put things right. To those insidious questions of Silvestri’s he gave calm short answers, without entering into any discussion and appearing not to want to take advantage, just as you say, of Silvestri’s kindness. He ate his meal quicker than us, and as soon as he’d finished, got up, excused himself and said good-bye, to me too, as if we’d never meet again. He put on an act, in fact. But then he rather overdid it. While I stayed in the restaurant-car with Silvestri for another half-hour, he took his suitcase and changed compartments. Then at Genoa he got out on his own and vanished. We’d meet in the hotel. Silvestri, though, simply wouldn’t leave me. He accompanied me back to my compartment, at once noticed Romolo’s absence, and said:

‘“Aha! Wasn’t the other Silvestri in this compartment?”

‘I replied that we’d got into conversation in the corridor, and met like that.

‘“I see,” he said, fixing me still with that malicious look. And he stayed with me till we got to Genoa. Then I stood on the platform waiting for his train to leave again for Turin, with him leaning out of the window.’

‘Who knows,’ said I. ‘How moved he must have been at your attentions! He was so much in love with you! To see you there on the platform, staying so as to talk to him, must have given him such ideas, such hopes!’

‘But I couldn’t go, I’d said I was taking the train to Ventimiglia. I was frightened he might find out there were no more trains, and that I was stopping off at Genoa, not changing at all. That’s why I stayed there talking to him. I think I even said something pleasant to him for the first time, made some little sentimental promise or other.’

‘And suppose he, as I’m convinced, hadn’t understood a thing about Romolo? In that case think of the effect, the turmoil you must have thrown him in by your saying something pleasant, by the little sentimental promise he’d been awaiting for years!’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ said Aurora firmly. ‘D’you know what he did, actually? He kept on looking up and down the platform and saying: “Odd, our Roman friend has vanished! Into thin air! I wonder what his job is, that fellow?” What do *you* think? Pleasant, isn’t

he? Don't you think?" And on he went talking about Romolo—I think in that five minutes while he was at the window and I was on the platform he wasn't thinking of anything else.'

'I can understand that, too, I insisted, finding Aurora's remarks both hurtful and offensive. 'Romolo was a very handsome man, particularly then, I imagine. Tall, athletic and so on. Silvestri has always had a ghastly inferiority complex. He wasn't good-looking, I agree. But he thought of himself as an absolute monster.'

'And he was right,' interrupted Aurora pitilessly. 'A devil.'

'Now, Aurora, enough of that. We must also take the subconscious into account. Silvestri, without suspecting any relations between you and Romolo, *sensed* there was something between you—an instinctive attraction to Romolo on your part, an attraction exaggerated by his own inferiority complex.'

Aurora shook her head, as if commiserating with me, and smiled:

'The subconscious, inferiority complex. I hear people talk about such things; and read about them in the papers and reviews. It's my fault, I expect, I'm too ignorant and can't understand. But I must say they seem all nonsense to me.'

'The subconscious, Aurora, is what each one of us has inside, without our even knowing. You too, for instance. . . .'

'Leave me out of it. All right then, Silvestri did have a subconscious inside him; with this difference, though, that he knew perfectly well what it was. Clear, definite, every detail thought out, inside him he'd a nice little plan to blackmail me.'



THERE'S NO DOUBT that the sense of sin is innate in the human mind; even in that of the most amoral, instinctive, or bestial of us.

The sense of sin, then, might explain Aurora's mistake and confirm Silvestri's innocence.

But what sin? Not betrayal; Almagià was not her husband. For her no human tie seemed sacred, matrimony or any other. What, if anything, *was* sacred to Aurora? Money. Her sin was worshipping money. Yes, that was it; in her crude mind remorse was mixed up with feelings that were actually extensions of the same sin; anger at having lost Almagià, suffering at having lost money! Aurora's hatred for Silvestri was due to self-blame for not having defended herself against him more effectively, for not having put up a tougher fight, been more whole-hearted in her devotion to money; what tortured her, in fact, was that she had not sinned more; but as Silvestri was innocent, this torture of Aurora's, guiltless as she was in evil-doing, simply hid, unbeknown' to her, remorse for her own sins. Wrong-doing, mistaken

tactics, and bad luck were all confused together in her mind; evil, remorse, punishment all fused. What I had to do was try my best to disentangle these ideas in her conscience, by showing her that Silvestri was innocent; that she, with all her realism, her cool head, and *her feet on the ground*, had been frightened of a mere chimera; and that the cause of her fright was immoderate greed for money. Without her knowing it (the subconscious!) she had felt herself to blame, and so had found a dangerous obstacle, an unconscious scapegoat, in Silvestri; in mild, candid, harmless Silvestri, who had not even noticed her passion for money at all! How mesmerized they had been, both of them!

As I brooded over this explanation I was noting meanwhile that Aurora, like all instinctive people, was unable to tell a story in its logical order, that is without letting her account of the facts be influenced and modified by other, later facts which she had not told me at all. Now which of these unspoken facts had convinced her that Silvestri was malignant? Would it convince me too?

Three days later, on her return to Rome, she had been told by the maid that, the night before she left for Genoa, there had been an odd incident on the telephone: this might have given Silvestri his first suspicion.

It had been one of the few times, and of course the last, when Romolo telephoned and gave the maid the name of Silvestri. All he wanted was to make sure that Almagià had really left, the night before, for Brazil. Then he had asked for the Signora. The maid had told him that the Signora had gone out; and suggested he telephone again at lunch time.

He had said, 'Silvestri speaking. Is the Signore in? Is the Signora in? No? Thanks.' No more; a few mumbled words, vaguely imitating Silvestri's voice. That had been Romolo's telephone call.

But a moment later, the real Silvestri telephoned. And the maid had been amazed. At that particular moment, perhaps, Silvestri had not given much thought to it: but next day, in the train, meeting Aurora together with *another Silvestri*, he would have understood.

Was that sufficient proof? Silvestri, it seemed to me, might still not have understood. It all depended on how the telephone call went. Aurora had not questioned the maid very closely; she couldn't without danger of betraying herself. How far, then, had Silvestri realized that someone with the same name had telephoned a moment before? The whole crux was there; but it wasn't so simple as Aurora had seen it. I on my part at once began making other guesses. Perhaps the maid had scarcely mentioned the first

telephone call. For instance, it might have gone like this: 'Yes, Dottor Silvestri, I've already told you: Signor Almagià has left, the Signora will be back for lunch.' And, in that case, very probably Silvestri had missed the ambiguity altogether. To me, he was still ingenuous in that scene in the restaurant-car.

Or, going to the opposite extreme, the telephone call could be reconstructed like this:

Maid: This is the Almagià home. Who's speaking?

Silvestri: Silvestri.

Maid: Dottor Silvestri?

Silvestri: Yes. Is the Signora in?

Maid: No, as I told you a moment ago, she'll be back for lunch.

Silvestri: How d'you mean, a moment ago?

Maid: Excuse me, but you telephoned a moment ago, didn't you?

Silvestri: Me?

Maid: Yes, you. You're Dottor Silvestri, aren't you?

Silvestri: Yes, Silvestri; me.

Maid: Well, didn't you telephone a moment ago asking for the Signore and then for the Signora?

Silvestri: Certainly not.

Maid: (Laughing, a little put out) And yet, I assure you . . .

Silvestri: (Perplexed) Oh well, it doesn't matter. Signor Almagià has left?

Maid: Yes, last night by air for Brazil.

Silvestri: Thank you, excuse me.

And, of course, if that's how the telephone call did go, it would be difficult, even for one who wanted to believe in Silvestri's innocence like me, to suppose that he would not immediately have linked it to the appearance in the restaurant-car at Aurora's side of another Silvestri. And even in the unlikely case of his remembering the telephone incident without suspecting anything, he would at least have mentioned it to Aurora as soon as Romolo left them alone. His silence, then, according to this explanation, proved that he had understood! Quly even here Aurora and I were not in agreement. Aurora put down that silence to malice and blackmail. I, in spite of everything, put it down to shyness and regard for her feelings: Silvestri knew, and did not profit by it. The problem became subtler; but it was not resolved.

Problem? So it was that now, was it? Did I doubt Silvestri too?

Definitely not. But the deeper Aurora went into her story, the more I felt a growing, imperative urge, almost a moral obligation, to use every proof and

argument to convince her of Silvestri's innocence. It seemed to me, I don't know why, that if I could only do that, I would have not so much protected my old friend's memory, as saved Aurora's soul.

On the other hand, if Aurora could not be saved, if she were irremediably shut off from any moral sense, incapable and unworthy of any slightest improvement, she could never have imagined even the *real* Silvestri; whose memory, therefore, it would be quite useless to protect! But if, on the other hand, I could succeed in making her understand. . . .

On her return to Rome Silvestri soon got in touch with her again. He'd written her a letter which she immediately destroyed, as, according to her, it was full of the nastiest insinuations.

'Such as?' I asked incredulously.

'Oh, well, I can't possibly remember his exact phrases now, more than five years later. But the gist was this: from beginning to end the letter was all about our meeting in the tram, and our farewell on the platform at Genoa. He meandered on about that for pages. He repeated again and again that he'd adored me for years, from the very first meeting. He said that all this time he'd been suffering silently from remorse at his disrespect when he'd plucked up courage to tell me. But that now, finally, after that lucky meeting, and after what I'd said to him, above

all after my last words on the platform, he realized that I'd forgiven him; and for the first time his heart etc. opened to hope etc. He was good enough to announce that he would soon be coming to Rome. Soon, as he knew that Ulderico would be away in Brazil a month. And he ended by saying that he was afraid of making a mistake. That it was up to me, as soon as I saw him again in Rome, to hint that he could go on hoping. But that, anyway, he thanked me deeply for those words and looks. He would keep them, those words and looks, enclosed like a treasure in his heart. . . . Oh yes, now I remember his exact phrase, as it was right at the end of the letter, before the signature; a clear, definite phrase, to frighten me and make me realize, if I hadn't already realized. It's stamped in my memory as if I'd always had it in front of me. It said: "a treasure enclosed in my heart, etc., etc., and for me this treasure is called our secret of Genoa." D'you see?

So saying Aurora fixed me with a look, frowning, agitated, with a slight froth on her lips, as if in me she saw Silvestri, her ruin. Poor Aurora! Why couldn't I take her in my arms, stroke her, soothe her, as some do with animals, and then gently make her understand that all this was a folly of hers, a mere folly? But only a saint would have had strength for that. And I'm no saint. Anything but. What could I do for her, then?

Nothing, absolutely nothing, except admire. And I did so then, too, looking at her with some uncertainty and alarm.

She was staring me up and down with those glistening colourless eyes of hers like black mirrors; bent over in her chair, almost crouching in a pose of sensual violence, as if ready to spring. Her body too seemed like that of a wild beast which I longed to tame though I knew myself incapable of it.

'I do see, Aurora,' I did my best to tell her, even so, 'I do see that it was all your imagination. Now let me have my say, just for one moment! Why, you don't want me to talk, you've let your imagination run away with you so!'

'Let my imagination run away with me? You know me very little, to say that!'

'But I knew Silvestri much better than you did!'

'I'm certain you didn't. Let me go on, though. Just hear me out till the end.'

'I'll hear you out till the end, Aurora, of course. But meanwhile I must say I can see nothing base or threatening in Silvestri's letter.'

'Clever you! Of course you don't. The double game. That was just his cunning. To tell me he loved me; and at the same time let me realize that if I wasn't ready to do what he wanted, he'd tell Ulderico all. I was to give him his way with a smile on my lips,

without noticing anything, almost loving him for it! For that's what he wanted, to be loved again! Of course the allusions were veiled, all wrapped up in sentiment and poetry. If not . . . He couldn't very well, particularly at the beginning, show his cards openly, suggest blackmail openly, as anyone else would who was satisfied with that. No, he wanted love, a great love, and that's why he kept his blackmail in reserve—like fire under ashes. He made me feel it and not see it. Have I explained myself?

'Don't you realize that what you're saying is absurd? How can anyone love, ask for love, and go in for blackmail at the same time? D'you think that's possible?'

'Why not? What's so strange about that?' replied Aurora calmly. And she was right. For instance, a man with the same nature as Aurora, rough and elemental, could quite easily harbour both love and violence at the same time. Isn't blackmail really an attempt to obtain a thing by violence? And it was quite natural for Aurora to see in others a mentality like her own. The mistake is also made by people who are both civilized and reflective.

I shouldn't have generalized. I should have spoken only of Silvestri: told Aurora that Silvestri was the kind of man who could never love and blackmail at the same time. But then, I noticed, my argument lost

force. Why was Silvestri an angel then? Aurora might have objected. What other men could do, couldn't he do too? In other words we were dealing with an improbability which, according to me, was an absolute impossibility, while according to Aurora, it was not an improbability at all!

And so every action of Silvestri's had a double value; every word, a double meaning; one for Aurora, and one, the opposite, for me. For instance, what did *the secret of Genoa* refer to? 'Of course, to the secret of my life,' would say Aurora, with absolute conviction, 'to my connexion with Romolo.'

For her, therefore, it was a crude and threatening phrase!

I, on the other hand, thought that Silvestri meant to refer to the extraordinary sweetness with which Aurora had treated him at the station of Genoa, to her unexpected and unhopèd-for promise of affection and sympathy, if not of love, which she had made from the platform. Fearful lest in the meanwhile Aurora might have changed her mind, he wrote to her at once to say that he would never take advantage of it, and would keep that sweetness and that promise of hers to himself, as a secret.

For me therefore, it was a delicate and reassuring phrase!

I said as much to Aurora, and tried to explain to her

Silvestri's mind, his reserve, his kindness. Wasted breath. Aurora let me go on talking for a bit, looking at me with a smile of pity, then sharply interrupted; if it had been only that phrase, or that letter, well, perhaps she might agree to discuss it with me; but that letter had been the first move, the first pawn, in a long, patient game which Silvestri played with her for months, till the end. And there was nothing to explain, according to Aurora, nothing to discuss; it was not a question of opinions, but of facts. All I had to do was listen to her and admit, that's all.

Some days later, as he had announced in his letter, Silvestri arrived in Rome. He went to visit her at once. And she, who would have far preferred not to see him at all, received him, from that day on, with a pretence of interest and pleasure, partly to keep him at bay, partly to avoid his harming her.

'But suppose,' I repeated tirelessly to Aurora, 'he had no intention whatsoever of harming you? Suppose he knew nothing? Then he'd have believed quite sincerely in your change of heart, in your kindness, Aurora; he'd have begun to hope. And why shouldn't he? Just think it over a minute: you'll see I'm right. Silvestri was not playing any game. Silvestri was the victim of a ~~mis~~understanding which, from that night at Genoa grew and gr^ew at his every visit, and at every look, every smile, every little word from you!'

Aurora shrugged her shoulders.

'Misunderstanding? D'you know what he blurted out, just like that, the very first time he came to see me in Rome? What he said to me straight away with that corpse's face of his? This; that when we said good-bye at Gera station he knew perfectly well that at that hour there were no more trains for Ventimiglia; so that I would have to spend the night in Genoa; but he had not said a word because . . . some twisted reason, I don't remember now, so unlikely it's slipped my mind. . . . Wait, oh yes; as he didn't want me to think he was offering me his company. As he really longed to offer me his company. And as he knew that wasn't possible, alas, he'd preferred to keep silent and go on to Turin. Of course, his real meaning was in the tone, the way he said, with a sigh: "Me? Keep you company? Poor me, I knew I hadn't a chance!" Meanwhile he was staring at me with that malicious little smile of his and those glittering eyes between half-shut lids just like embers under ashes, and as sure of himself, as definite as if he'd seen me entering the Bristol with Romolo; in fact, as if he saw me doing so that very moment. He shrugged his shoulders, humble as could be: "Me? Keep you company? Poor me, I knew I hadn't a chance!" Because I already had someone to keep me company, of course; and he knew it, and sighed and was silent, and always would be silent.

always, even in the future, to everyone! Imagine it; the secret of Genoa, our secret! For, in return, I was to love him a bit, pet him a bit, like a lap-dog who would always, with that secret of his, be crouching at my feet. Ugh, how disgusting!

Now I had no doubts any more; Aurora, who was a normal person in everything else, was suffering from a fixation, a loathing for Silvestri, who, according to her, had tried to ruin her.

What arguments could I find to convince her, to cure her?

Silvestri began coming to Rome more and more frequently, even after Almagià's return from Brazil. 'And when he was in Rome he would ring up every minute, try to see me every day, and more than once a day even, almost as if I'd admitted and confessed to being in love with him myself!'

'But that's just exactly what he did think, Aurora! There's the misunderstanding!'

Should I have tried to explain to Aurora that Silvestri, unlike herself, was capable of imagining, in others, a mentality different from his own? And that he could understand Aurora both feeling a new affection for him, as he thought, and at the same time wanting to keep Almagià's money? Dream of romantic adventure with him, and still not risk, at any cost, her own financial security?

Almagià, on his side, had noticed Silvestri's growing assiduity. But it did not bother him, it seems. Or at least so it seemed then. Anyway, Aurora assured me, she had never seen Silvestri except in her own home and at the most proper hours, until . . . until things took a new turn. Almagià, that last year, was away travelling more and more often. Silvestri, profiting by these repeated absences, gradually became more demanding.

Demanding? Here, too, it was certain that Aurora had not understood Silvestri; and that Silvestri had not understood Aurora. It was a mutual misunderstanding, which I explained like this; Aurora was becoming more and more afraid of him, and so treated him with more and more open flattery and tenderness; Silvestri was deceived, and felt authorized to hope for more and more affection from her. Until, one day, of course, he hoped for all her affection. And as a first step he hoped, of course, that she'd leave Almagià. But, quite naturally, too, he probably never came straight out with this, never explained it word by word. So that Aurora must have got a very different meaning from those broken phrases and timid hints of his; the worst possible.

I could have sworn that was the way things went. Knowing Silvestri, I had no other explanation. On the false account given by Aurora, I had reconstructed the

reality. Only now I kept it to myself. I was tired of talking to a brick wall. Aurora was too convinced of Silvestri's double-dealing. I decided to keep silent and wait for some inspiration, some lucky idea. Surely it wasn't possible for the truth not to triumph in the end. I looked at Aurora as she went on with her story, and felt, alas, that it was only too possible; I had no mathematical proof of Silvestri's innocence; even if, to take things to absurdity, I were to spend the rest of my life convincing her. . . .

The strength of charity! the miracles of love! People talk about them, they exist; there's no doubt of that. But think of all the married couples who live their entire lives together, tenderly loving each other, and without ever understanding each other at all! Not even if, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, I were in love with Aurora, not even if I were in the future to marry her, would I ever be sure of persuading her to think like me, about Silvestri or anything else!



ONE EVENING DURING one of Almagià's absences, Silvestri, gradually encouraged by Aurora's ambiguous behaviour, finally suggested, whether ingenuously or not, that she go out with him; he invited her to dinner, and then, if she felt like it, to the cinema.

There seemed nothing dangerous or illicit about the evening. It was not even a secret. For on leaving, Almagià advised Aurora—as he had recently taken to doing—to go out in the evenings during his absence, and had asked Silvestri to accompany her. Even so they had never actually done it till that day. Silvestri confessed to Aurora that, in a way, he did not want to do it; simply because there was this permission, almost this push, from Almagià. Aurora, on her side, now told me that she'd never wanted to either, for every reason. Finally she agreed, just to show Silvestri that she was not afraid of him.

Anyway, what was she to fear from an evening's outing with him? Silvestri's remarks had been getting, she said, more and more insidious ever since the day of the restaurant-car, but they had never been actually

improper. Nor had he ever dared stretch even a hand towards her, or attempt a caress of any kind. And he could certainly have tried this without any risk of scandal; how often he had stayed in the drawing-room at Via Tre Madonne until late at night, when the servants had all gone to bed, and Aurora, yawning with sleep, herself called him a taxi in the small hours! The only risk he ran was some gesture of irritation from Aurora, perhaps a tiny movement, perhaps just an expression at the corner of her mouth. But even this risk Silvestri had never wanted to face.

So Aurora went out for the evening with him feeling far less worried than she had on any of the evenings when she'd seen him in the solitude of her drawing-room, and there struggled against his 'perfidy'.

'I felt almost gay, almost pleased: looking my best, pleasantly hungry. For though it's true Silvestri had been getting unbearable for some months, I hoped that evening, if for no other reason than our being out of the house, just us two alone among everyone else, he wouldn't behave as he had before. I thought at least for that night he'd drop it. Instead of which . . .

'At nine, as we'd agreed, he came to fetch me in a taxi. With a "delicacy" which seemed quite silly to me and was anyway false and hypocritical, he had

insisted on my giving up the comfort of my own car, the Cadillac, and using a taxi, as he always did.

'As soon as I saw him at the end of the entrance hall, in his faded raincoat, I realized, from the peculiar expression on his face and a strange new smile he had, that he intended that evening to have a special meaning. His bow was more decisive, his hand-kiss readier than it had ever been before. He took my arm at once to lead me out through the little garden. And those thin nervous fingers of his kneaded and squeezed my arm; he seemed to be trying to warn me, trying to say: "Let's come clean now! This is the start of a new life!" I understood that at once. What I hadn't understood; what worried me, was his novel attitude. In the darkness of the taxi, during the short drive, I glanced at his profile, trying to hide my preoccupation; perhaps it was partly due to the darkness and the passing headlamps but it seemed harder, stronger; the profile of a man with a definite plan in mind. At least, so I said to myself. But what plan *could* Silvestri have in mind?'

That was what I was asking myself, too, but in quite another sense! Aurora was talking of Silvestri as an absolute gangster! Too absurd!

'He suggested taking me to dine in a small restaurant where he himself usually had his meals when he came

to Rome, and where he assured me the cooking was excellent, though the place was simple and the service rough. Anyway, he'd chosen it, he said, for one reason alone; it was in a street with my name, Via Aurora. For the same reason, he said, since the first day he met me, every time he came to Rome he'd tried to stay at a little hotel in the same street. But he'd never found a room free! So far, no harm done. Just the usual poetic nonsense, the usual sentimentality. The novelty, the strangeness, I felt more in the tone of his voice, when he'd said, trembling, and dragging every word "You wouldn't mind, would you, dining in a little place I usually eat at, a simple little restaurant in Via Aurora?"

'I couldn't say exactly why, but I felt at once there was something decided, definite, about that simple phrase, and a fear too, of being disappointed by my reply. Of course for that very reason I was tempted to suggest any other place, a restaurant in Trastevere, for instance, or the Casina Valadier. . . But, I must admit I was curious, not about the place in Via Aurora, of course, curious about the reasons why Silvestri wanted to take me there. And so, after a moment's hesitation, I told him it was all right with me.

'The place was small, more modest, than I'd expected. The communicating rooms, a zinc counter, shelves with flasks on them, some tables with paper

cloths, and walls stippled and painted very light green. Silvestri had telephoned to reserve the best table, at the end, near a glass door which did not give on to a passage and at that season anyway was always kept shut.

'We sat down in a corner, on each side of a small square table, and gave our orders. We were very close to each other; unintentionally our knees touched now and again. And Silvestri, as he raised a glass of Frascati towards me, was gazing at me from so near-to that I seemed to see his eyes for the first time. Green, like a cat's, and they seemed on fire, full of sparks. Seeing him so close, I can tell you, did rather worry me.

'I raised my glass, too, smiled, muttered some answer to his toast, and did my best to show a pleasure in his company which, I can assure you, I was very far from feeling. At the last moment just before he sipped his wine, it occurred to me that if I was really pretending to be a friend I ought to prevent him drinking for the sake of his health. And so to complete my act I stretched out my hand, put it on his holding the glass, and lowered it gently: "You know you mustn't drink." He fixed me again with those burning eyes, and replied:

' "I obey, as the order comes from you. And also as wine means nothing to me any more now. It's not wine I need. . . ." And he grimaced, gave a silent and mysterious little smile and gazed at me more and

more fixedly, as if to hint, without actually saying the word, just what it was he needed.

'I said nothing. It was the first time Silvestri had ever used that tone to me. Confusedly I thought, perhaps he means he needs some drug. But as I was still silent, he began again, in a whisper, leaning over towards me, almost speaking into my ear:

"You don't even ask me what it is I need? Aren't you curious?"

"No," said I, still doing my friend act. "No, Silvestri, I'm not curious to know what can do you harm. . . ."

"But I," he said then, quivering, "I've always been curious, and become more so every day that passes. About everything. I want to know. And try it out."

'So the conversation was taking its usual course once more. He was alluding, by all this, to my relations with Romolo; and alluding, as always, in phrases which could have another meaning! Tired, losing patience, I said without looking at him:

"I'd be careful if I were you. Wanting to know too much, try too much, can be dangerous." And I added quickly so that he should have no doubts: "Dangerous in every way."

"But danger is just what I'm looking for!" Aurora, why don't you want to understand me?"

'It was the pure truth. I *didn't want* to understand

him. Silvestri revolted me. And I may have been just on the point of saying so when a strange couple entered the little restaurant, and attracted our attention.

'The man was of some vague age between forty and sixty. Tall, fair, pale. Thin in the face and fat in the body. In a big camel-hair overcoat, the belt twisted across his paunch. A tired look, like a somnambulist.

'She was quite the opposite. Small, plump, dark, strong. A three-quarter-length astrakhan with a fox-fur collar; a little cap, also fox fur; and short boots for the rain, though it was not raining that night. She looked like an animal trainer.

'Silvestri explained to me that he was a famous painter; she'd been on the stage and had a certain reputation at one time, but hadn't acted for many years and her name was now forgotten. The painter, Sicilian by birth, rich and noble, was a serious artist; his pictures fetched high prices, even abroad. But he was very lazy, and as he had no need to sell his paintings in order to live, did very little work. He had a home in Rome, but travelled continuously, particularly in Africa, the East, and South America, as he loved hot climates. Since before the war, that is since she had given up the stage for him, she'd been his wife or his mistress; no one had ever bothered to find out which. Anyway it didn't matter much, as she didn't leave him for an instant and followed him everywhere.

'They had scarcely sat down, not far from us, when they began quarrelling. He was leaning towards her across the table with joined hands, and seemed to be imploring her in a quavering voice: she sat silent, erect, indifferent, scarcely deigning a few dry phrases in reply. Suddenly she made to take off her fur; and he got up, precipitously, to help her. She was wearing a black silk dress with a low neck; a muscular neck, shoulders like a boxer's.

'The painter went off with the fur coat towards some hooks. She called him back and said in a loud voice, slowly though, with no trace of anger and as if reciting a lesson:

' "What are you doing, you idiot? You know I don't want that; hooks ruin it."

' "I'm so sorry!" whimpered the man, and hurriedly came back to the table and put the coat down on a chair beside her.

' "No, not on the chair. I don't want it," she said calmly. "Keep it in your arms."

' "But how shall I eat, then?"

' "Oh, what do I care if you eat or not. . . . Don't eat."

'And he, all docile, folded the astrakhan in his arms, shut his eyes and was silent. Everyone in the room burst out laughing. Slowly, quite unmoved, the woman ate a plateful of spaghetti, a steak, salad, fruit.

He sat in front of an empty plate and did not say another word.

'Silvestri explained that this scene, or another like it, was repeated more or less every night. But it was only a stage-scene, he said, an act demanded and ordered beforehand by the painter. He was the real tyrant, not she. She, an excellent woman, acted this odious part of hers unwillingly, suffering at it and only did it to please him. Everyone knew he'd chosen her because she was an actress capable of playing his game.

"How revolting," I said to Silvestri, "I've no sympathy at all for a degenerate."

"Degenerate? Why?" went on Silvestri then, murmuring in my ear. "Don't be so superficial. Isn't everyone degenerate, in love? That man is no different from any others. Only he has the position and money not to be ashamed of anything. He doesn't work much, but when he does, he paints beautiful pictures. His life is happy. And I envy him." He looked at me again with that little silent smile and those sparkling eyes of his, as if admitting something more than his words. Then stung, I admit it this time, into intentional malice, I asked, to force him into the open:

"Why? Would you like to be in that man's place?"

"Not exactly. I'd enjoy, perhaps, scenes of a rather

different kind. Tastes vary so. But above all, I'd like another woman with me. . . ." And he gazed at me as if to tell me that woman was myself. Then, returning to the painter and the actress he added: "They also say she has lovers, and he makes no objection, in fact accepts them willingly. That, if you really want to know, is nearer my own tastes. It's a vice, perhaps, I don't deny it. At least, that's what they call it. But in love everything can be a vice, don't you think? The important thing is that it should be love, real love, the sort that stops at nothing. I'm curious, Aurora. You've noticed it, very curious. If a woman interests me, I always end by knowing her inside out. And if I love her . . . I'm curious. But I'm not jealous. I can accept her having a husband, and even a lover." And he laughed and looked at me like before. I said nothing. And pretended not to understand. But it was obvious; Silvestri had taken me to that restaurant so that I should see that disgusting scene between the painter and the actress, and so that he could slip, then, into that conversation.'

Certainly, if I'd taken all this literally, I'd have found Aurora's account astounding.

I did not recognize, I could not recognize, my dear, mild, romantic Gustavo in those strange ambiguous remarks, which bordered on the obscene, and scarcely veiled vice.

But was the account truthful? Aurora, even without wanting to, with that fixed obsession of hers that Silvestri was diabolic—hadn't she exaggerated, deformed, falsified the reality, and then gradually, as the years passed, her own memories of it too?

Silvestri, from his very timidity, might perhaps have commented on the ridiculous scene between the painter and the animal tamer in words whose meaning Aurora easily mistook. And as for direct hints, as for the blackmail . . . ah, no! that I was certain of! They had existed only in Aurora's imagination. Anyway, even with this story Aurora had not given me a concrete proof of poor Silvestri's perfidy.

Blackmail? Silvestri capable of blackmail?

For a moment I examined this as a theory. I thought of myself. I searched my memory. I tried to remember my state of mind in the most morbid moments of desire for some particular woman. They had been, without a doubt, days and weeks of madness. Had fate so willed, I might have come to a very bad end. Once, if I'd not been outstandingly lucky, I'd have been killed. So I had taken risks myself. Had plumbed, as the expression is, the depths myself. But, whether madness, passion or vice, I had never calculated. I had never, not even in my imagination, thought of placating my anguish and forcing her finally to cede by sheer cold will. . . . What enjoyment would

I have got out of it? The means were too foreign to the end. I would have lost all desire on the way. And that must surely have been true also for Silvestri.

Interrupting Aurora, I explained this reasoning of mine to her. I told her that till now she had given me no real proof that Silvestri had intended to blackmail her.

Aurora smiled. And went on with her story.

Shortly after that night at the restaurant, one Sunday in November, while Almagià was still away from Rome, Aurora, seeing that Silvestri was still besieging her with exasperating ambiguous remarks, decided at last to be frank herself. Oh! Silvestri's assiduity, his attentions, his hints, and now his confidences too. Oh! his smile, his look, those thin, nervy, imploring hands of his, touching her forearms. . . . That Sunday in November Aurora felt she had touched rock bottom, and could bear no more.

It was raining, Silvestri had come to lunch with her; and after lunch he sat down next her on the sofa, and stayed there in silence a long time. The white poodle was dozing on the hearth-rug at Aurora's feet. Through the window could be seen the dark, almost black, evergreens dripping and looking even more depressing than usual. Dim light, feverish drowsiness, sound of rain, all the tedium of a Sunday afternoon in

Rome. And Silvestri talked. What was he saying? Aurora could not remember, and anyway could not have repeated it to me. She only remembered his talking as usual—by now it was an obsession—about love. But what is love if not the offer of oneself to the person one loves? Of the best of oneself? And what was Silvestri's best?

Now, thinking it over well, I realized he had never told Aurora clearly that he'd discovered her intrigue with Romolo. He'd never told her that he knew Romolo was called Pollastrini. He'd never threatened her.

So, instinctively, and yet with every likelihood, I felt, of being right, I imagined Silvestri, on the sofa in the Via Tre Madonne, that rainy Sunday in November, talking to Aurora about Olcenengo. Comparing, in the hope and perhaps even the certainty still of her understanding him, the desperate tedium of that Roman Sunday with the sweet melancholy of the same hour and day in the garden of his old home; the big trees under the beating rain, some copper red, others like huge golden, almost luminous, plumes; the poplars, already bare of leaves; and beyond their hazy embroidery, a grey infinity of rice-fields.

Is that what Silvestri had talked about to the woman whom by now he thought his, deceived since the spring before, without knowing it, by what was only

a silly deception on her part? Was that his way of offering her his life?

And perhaps, eventually, in order to say that they must clear things up once and for all with his friend Almagià, he had also murmured sadly, seriously:

‘We must come to a decision. . . . I must talk to Ulderico. . . .’

The fact is that, at this phrase, or another like it (she could remember only the general sense; the tone of perfidy, according to her, with which he said ‘Ulderico’), Aurora had lost her temper. She’d turned on him like a wild animal, crying:

‘You’re a swine! A filthy swine! That’s what you are! All right then, let’s go. I’ll come wherever you want, to hell if necessary; if only we stop this and never mention it again!’ And she had got up, snatched a dressing-case, called a taxi, and gone, with Silvestri, to the hotel where he was staying. A squalid little place near the Termini station.

Silvestri? What had he said? What had he done?

‘Nothing,’ said Aurora, furious at the very memory. ‘Nothing at all. Your dear friend never even opened his mouth. I did have one satisfaction though. That swinish look, that idiot smile which was intended to be so intelligent and which he had obsessed me with for months, had been wiped right off his face. He looked at me now with quite a different expression,

I can swear. Of fear. He was afraid of me now. In the taxi I said: "Now, I'm coming with you, and will do whatever you want! But remember that if you say a word about Romolo to Ulderico, I'll kill you." '

'What did he say?' I asked.

'He? Nothing. Suddenly he seemed to have gone limp. He was still silent. Of course, it never even crossed my mind to kill him. I'd no desire to end in prison. And for him! But I said that because I realized he was afraid, and I wanted to frighten him more. If only I'd frightened him right off at the beginning!'

'What happened then?'

'Then, I was with him, in that filthy room of his. You can guess what I felt like. Quick, I said, be quick about it. Revolting! I'd never been so revolted in my life. I rushed off at once. It was still raining. He took me home, still without saying a word. But I didn't want the servants to see us returning together. So I made him get out earlier, at the corner of Villa Borghese. D'you know what he had the face to say, at the last moment?'

'No, what?'

'It was the first time he'd opened his mouth from the moment I'd made up my mind. He was still pretending to be innocent, imagine! He said faintly, gazing at me with wide-open eyes as if trying to hypnotize me. "Who is Romolo?" And d'you know

what I replied? I was cruel, but he deserved it. I replied, "Romolo? You little worm, why try to make me believe you don't know? Romolo is the *other one*. The other Silvestri, the real one, for me. A man, I can tell you, who has all you haven't got!" On that I left him, went back home, and never saw him again.'

'A fortnight later he was dead,' I said to Aurora, as if to bring her face to face again with reality; and meanwhile I was thinking of Silvestri, who a little later that same Sunday afternoon had come on foot, under the rain, to my home; and in turmoil of mind I tried to remember the words of despair he had said to me then, and to explain to myself how on earth Aurora could have misunderstood him so till the very last moment.

'I know he died a fortnight later,' said Aurora, 'but it wasn't the end of it for me. All that was nothing. Your dear sweet friend Silvestri hadn't done his worst by me yet. Just listen to this little story!'

Meanwhile I was seeing Silvestri again, by my front-door, at the last moment, when I had told him not to take it so to heart, as the only real sin is hypocrisy. . . . His flash of temper, and that sudden terrifying glance, almost of hatred, at me. And that strange piercing evil laugh, a laugh of diabolic triumph. And those words of explanation: 'You've told me, to console me,' that I'm not a hypocrite like you, and so must be calm.

Then I can assure you, I'm quite calm. I haven't any of your remorse, my lad. Haven't you realized I've crossed the Rubicon?

There wasn't a shadow of doubt that Aurora was accusing him wrongly. But how had things really gone? How had such a monstrous misunderstanding been possible between those two?

And what about Silvestri's laugh. And his last words to me?

With renewed anguish, I tried to make sense of it all.



BEFORE AURORA WENT ON I took her hand and kissed it, as if in pleading. Then, squeezing it slightly, I kept it in my own. Couldn't I possibly succeed in transmitting even a slight reflexion of my thoughts to her? With all the calm and gentleness at my command, I said to her:

'Aurora, you think I'm a sensible person, don't you? I'm a professional man, a lawyer and university professor, my work and earnings are good; people esteem and trust me. In fact, I'm not a sentimentalist, a literary man, a poet. I'm much more of a man of business. Well, Aurora, believe me. Do believe what I say. There was a huge misunderstanding between you and poor Silvestri. Silvestri never dreamt of blackmailing you. First of all, he wouldn't have been capable of it. But then, from your own account, I'm quite convinced that Silvestri was, from beginning to end, entirely innocent. The telephone conversation with the maid, the meeting in the restaurant-car, the remarks on the platform; he never knew or understood a thing. That's why his only remark then was, "Who's

Romolo?" You wounded him, thinking you were in the right, but you wounded him to death. And unfortunately, Aurora, that isn't just a manner of speech. I had the impression before. Now, I as good as know. Silvestri *wanted* to die.'

And I described to Aurora his visit late that Sunday afternoon, before leaving and going back to die in his own countryside. Yes, there was no doubt about it at all; and as I said this to Aurora, I was amazed at my not having understood it before. That was the meaning of his laugh and his words '*crossed the Rubicon*'.

Aurora listened, staring at me grimly; her eyebrows down, her mouth tight shut, and her lower lip jutting. Yes, I could read her mind. She was having no inner struggle to resist my words: on the contrary they annoyed, almost enraged her. The slightest doubt that I might be right never even touched her. The only reason she listened to me in silence was her respect for my rank as a successful lawyer: one from whom she also needed help. And she was stuck fast, as she spoke, in her feelings towards Silvestri; in obstinate angry rancour.

I was facing a freak reaction, perverse, almost lunatic. Her complete incapacity to understand what Silvestri was really like; that was Aurora's curse! She was still quivering from it now, a furious victim. I looked at her in alarm and amazement. And I wondered

what would happen to her if by any chance she were finally able to grasp the perfectly simple reality; that Silvestri was both good and innocent. But I was thinking carelessly. Chance? No chance, even a lucky one, would do; it needed a miracle.

Even so, I refused to give in. I described Silvestri's last visit to Aurora, then talked to her at length about him, hoping every moment to find a phrase, remember a little episode, which might illuminate her.

'Try,' I said to her, 'try, just once again, even without believing; just try for a moment to think of Silvestri as I say he is. Try and imagine you never met him. I'm talking to you about a new person. Try, Aurora!'

Aurora freed her hand from mine (she had very beautiful hands—long, soft, sinuous) and said wearily:

'What's the use of my trying? If Silvestri was what you say he was, then why, when he felt himself wrongly accused and wounded to death, as you say, why didn't he rebel? Why, in fact, did he accept what I offered him so insultingly, and take me to his hotel?'

Yes, I had the explanation for that too. It was a painful explanation; but so human. At Aurora's words Silvestri must have seen a kind of abyss suddenly opening beneath him; at that moment the whole of his own life, the flaw in his passion for her, and

perhaps for all the other women he had loved, came to him clear and obvious, as if lit by a livid flash of lightning. Disgust, horror at himself. The certainty of having made a huge overall mistake. Condemned without hope of appeal. Well, he might as well taste to the dregs the abjection in which he'd fallen.

I tried to tell Aurora this, but it wasn't easy. And I had just begun when I was interrupted. Someone had come into the shop. Aurora got up and went inside. She switched on the light and greeted the customer in Italian. A minute later she came back to get the little wrist-watch which she had wrapped up. 'It's the Inspector of Customs,' she muttered to me.

There, anyway, I'd doubted her wrongly. On that point at least I had to believe her.

From the darkness of the little room and the arm-chair in which I had listened to that unlikely tale of hers, I could see her, if I just turned my head, talking in the bright light to someone out of sight. She was leaning over the counter, arching her bust over her slim, strong waist, unintentionally showing me her big, round, well-shaped buttocks. How odd, it occurred to me, that I should be here, like this, half-hidden! And if I asked myself why I'd stopped at Montgenèvre, why I'd agreed to lend Romolo my car, I had to admit honestly that it was due far less to affection for

Silvestri than to curiosity, to that rash desire or hope for adventure which I'd still not abandoned. . . . Anyway, if Aurora hadn't understood Silvestri so much the worse for her! Why 'was I so 'obstinately trying to convince her? Why not take her as she was? Five minutes of pleasure, she was well worth that. The place, the hour, were made for it. As for that long absurd story of hers, perhaps I shouldn't be worrying about that at all; all I had to do was take it as a prelude, unusual and piquant though rather silly, to the brief artificial paradise awaiting me. And I need have no fear of profaning the memory of dear Silvestri. He was too far above this animal creature.

There was just one thing holding me back—vanity; what would the animal creature think? •

Oh, she'd see it in only one way. If I gave in to her charms, I'd look as if I were admitting defeat; as if I were renouncing belief in my dead friend.

Suppose, though, I said to her beforehand; look, you attract me and that's nothing to do with Silvestri, whom you couldn't be more wrong about though we both hold to our own ideas there. Meanwhile let's have some fun and I'll show my gratitude . . . ah, how ridiculous I'd look; my indignation at Silvestri being slandered would, in fact, seem weaker than a whim of no importance—though likely to be costly. •

So I reflected, and ended in doubt and indecision;

then Aurora returned from the shop; she sat down in the same place as before, facing me, in the half-shadow; lit a cigarette; and went on with her tale.

A few days after Silvestri's death she received a mysterious telephone call. Someone who would not give his name, but said he was employed by the General Assurance Company, asked her to come to the company's offices for an important communication. The matter, the man said, was very private. It was in the Signora Almagià's interests that she should mention it to no one at all, not even her husband.

Aurora went next day. This is what it was about. Silvestri had insured his own life in Aurora's favour. The sum due to Aurora was about 20 million lire.

I was astounded. Not at Silvestri's action. But that Aurora, having had such a definite proof of Silvestri's affection, should have forgiven him nothing and still hated him as she did. Of course I could not avoid showing my amazement and contempt.

'But it was my ruin, that cursed twenty million!' replied Aurora, angrier than ever. 'If only he'd never left it to me!'

'He was very ill,' I said, 'he must have paid a huge premium. How astounding!'

He was very ill, he knew he was going to die. He had no heirs, no close relations. When he went back

there to his own parts, he must have had a fit of remorse at what he'd done to me, at the torture he'd put me through. And to get me to forgive him, he sold a piece of land and paid the insurance. With what result? Disaster for me, that's all. Because he thought that I was married. For him, and everyone at the insurance company, I was the Signora Almagià, living at 28 Via Tre Madonne, Rome. He hadn't even put my real surname; he didn't know it, of course. And so to get that cursed money, I had either to tell Ulderico or swear an affidavit. To tell Ulderico never even crossed my mind. Twenty million was something. But Ulderico, for me, was worth more.'

How much? I would have liked to ask her, interested in spite of myself at the extraordinary simplicity of her character. But all I said was:

'And so you swore an affidavit?'

'Yes. But you know what an affidavit before a notary means, of course; it needs four witnesses, and they all have to go together, etc. And I had to do it all in secret. And before a certain date, if not it was too late. Ulderico, who was always travelling, would not budge that time. Eventually he set off for Paris. Romolo had organized things and found the four witnesses. So far, so good. Only, with all the coming and going, between lawyer's and notary's and in-

insurance office, when Ulderico got back from Paris he heard all about it. He told me he'd had suspicions and got me trailed by a private detective. I don't believe it. I'm sure that was all just chance. But, anyway, he faced me with it when I already felt safe; and I could think of no excuse.

'I did hope, though, to convince him of what really was the pure truth; that Silvestri had never been my lover. No one had known a thing; the only time I'd been to his hotel there'd been no proofs; and so it was just as if it hadn't happened at all.

'But the insurance was a proof to Ulderico. I cried, I screamed, I made scenes, I said I was ready to renounce the twenty million, anything he wanted; all to no effect. And, mind you, Romolo had never come into this at all. The four witnesses, I told Ulderico, had been found by the lawyer I'd gone to.

'Well, he was determined on our separating, there was nothing for it. But he was set on saving appearances; so he made me go with him to Brazil. There he got rid of me, and that was that. None of his friends has ever known anything. Divorce due to incompatibility of temperament: that was the news he sent back to Rome. Anyway, what did he care?

'He's in Brazil now; a turnover of billions he has there; and must have married by now. But you, as a friend of Silvestri, can write to him and ask him to

give me a little help. He can send the money to you, if he doesn't want to do it directly to me. After all, we were together five years, the happiest years of his life . . . he might have a little generosity!

I told Aurora I'd write to Almagià and that, in any case, I'd be seeing him when he next came to Europe, in two or three months' time; but that I had no illusions. I knew him through and through, and had no illusions about him at all.

'I must pay the rent before the end of March,' went on Aurora. 'Half a million francs.'

'But the twenty million lire from the insurance, how on earth did you lay that out so badly?'

'Oh, well, we soon got through it. The last went in a bad speculation. Romolo set up a revue on his own, for the provinces. A complete disaster. And on top of that, he got ill. It was serious, he nearly died. And after that he was never really well again. He needed mountain air. We hadn't money for a sanatorium. A friend of mine from Nice wrote to me about this shop here at Montgenèvre. So we came here. We've been here two years. I can't say it's been much fun.'

'Aurora,' I said, watching her sadly. 'What a pity! . . . You're still young, as beautiful as ever. . . . What a pity you didn't love Silvestri, didn't understand him!'

'Oh, stop it! Don't say another word about Silvestri now, if we're to stay friends.'

'I intend to go on talking about him, though, until you see your mistake.'

'Drop it, please. It's no use.' And she got up slowly, with a heavy sigh. She moved into the half-darkness of the little room, brushing against me and enveloping me in her scent for a moment. She stopped at the nearest window and stood with her back to me, looking out; at the lights of the Hôtel du Col, at the yellow headlamps of cars passing slowly on the frozen road amid the blue snow.

With a slow, natural gesture she pulled the sleeves of her jersey up over her elbows, raised an arm, and arranged the hair on the nape of her neck.

'Peyrani,' she said in a low voice, without turning, motionless except for that movement of her fingers in her hair. 'Peyrani, why don't you advance me that money? Then, if you manage to convince Ulderico, you'll get it back. If not, I'll be in your debt.'

I'd expected this after all. Even so I had no immediate reply. Only after a second or two of silence did I find a phrase.

'How much do you say you need?'

'Half a million.'

'Franco?'

'Francs

'It's a lot of money,' I muttered, playing for time.

'Don't tell me you haven't got it. You've no family, or worries, your affairs are going well. . .'. Or look, let's do something else!' At this point she turned round, came up to me, sat on the arm of my chair and leant down over me; by the faint blue reflexion through the window I could see her gleaming eyes fixed on me laughingly, and her big breasts in the tight jersey, and the low neck, and the deep cleavage below. 'Where did you say you were going on business?'

'To Saint-Raphaël.'

'Is it very important business?'

'How d'you mean?' I said, without guessing what she was thinking.

'Is it business that takes up all your time, leaves you none free?'

'All I have to do is check over the contract for a villa that a client's buying. Well . . . ?'

'When are you leaving? Tomorrow morning, I suppose. . . .

'Tonight, if Romolo's not too late.'

'Tonight. That's just as good. I'll come too. We'll spend a few days together. And drive over to Monte Carlo. You lend me a little money to gamble with. Oh, don't be alarmed now, very little. Roulette

amuses me even with five thousand francs to play with. If I lose, that's that. If not I go on. But I might be in luck. One never knows. Then I'd give you back your five thousand francs and pocket the rest. Eh? What about it?

Obviously the casino was only an excuse. If I accepted, if I took her with me, obviously, whether we went to Monte Carlo or not, whether she won or lost, I'd end by giving her the half-million francs she needed. And we'd never even mention Silvestri again!

I must confess, though, that I was tempted. For a moment I sat there silent, in self-torture. Aurora bent down lower over me, till her lips almost grazed mine. And in a quick, easy tone, which would have contradicted her lascivious pose and meaning look, but for the whisper, she went on:

'Why don't you say something? Isn't it a good idea, mine? Perhaps you're afraid Romolo mightn't agree? You heard him: heavens, he was the first to say, "Convince Aurora to go away for a little holiday!" So you needn't worry about Romolo.'

'No,' said I, getting up. I looked her in the eyes for a long while, in silence. And I stroked her hair slightly. Quite suddenly, she turned her head and bit my wrist. I thought of the long drive, at night, through the mountains, with the contact and scent of her beside

me; arrival at the rocky Corniche; the harbour with its embroidery of white houses and its white yachts, mirrored in the black water; the glit and gleam of the Hôtel de Paris, thick carpets, a 'bedroom,' Aurora's dark, bare body in the clean sheets; then pleasure free and slow, with no remorse and no regrets. . . . After which? After which there was Silvestri facing me, in his dripping raincoat.

Was I to abandon him a second time?

I knew perfectly well that even if I said no to Aurora I would not have implanted the tiniest doubt in her conviction that Silvestri was a rogue, nor would I have lessened her hatred for him in the least. From that point of view my renouncing an affair, which, I must confess, seemed to promise more and more fun, would have been quite useless.

On the other hand, if I didn't have the strength of mind to renounce it I'd have to muster up enough to stop defending Silvestri to Aurora on pain of ridicule, and even in a way stop defending him to myself too.

Why pride myself on an instinct, an impulse which I did not have? I'd been thinking it over a good half-hour already; perhaps ever since Aurora had begun to abuse my friend, and I to realize that I'd have much preferred quite a different conversation with her.

Anyway, I thought it over a minute or two longer.

I weighed all the pros and cons. I put Aurora and Silvestri on each side of grotesque scales. And, knowing my own corrupt heart, I questioned myself with meticulous care, feasting and at the same time half-wanting to find that the insult to my dead friend was increasing my own enjoyment.

But no! To my surprise, and quite without priding myself, I found on the other hand that the memory of that friendship was stronger than any wish of mine for enjoyment; and that it would have given me no pleasure to change my opinion, or pretend to change my opinion, about dear old Silvestri.

Aurora tempted me more than any woman had for years. And yet Silvestri was still up there; very high up.

'No,' I repeated, lowering my hand and putting it on her shoulder, as if she could understand me. 'I didn't want that, Aurora.'

'What, then?' she exclaimed, laughing.

'It's useless, Aurora. I'm afraid I've already bored you enough with my sermons.'

'What d'you want from me then?'

'Nothing, Aurora. Just, if you can, when you're quite alone and very bored, to give another thought to what I've tried to explain.'

'You've tried to explain far too much, anyway. And what should I give a thought to, exactly?'

'To Silvestri, and how he really loved you.'

'*Merde*,' said Aurora.

That was that. I said good-bye; put on my overcoat; went out, crossed the square, and went to the Hôtel du Col to wait for Romolo.



THE WINDOW IN my room faced west, over towards the Italian valleys; leaning on the sill I gazed at the distant peaks of the Rognosa and the Sises quickly shedding their last outlines and tints, at the sky turning dark-blue, almost black, and the clustering sparkle of the stars.

Was the spectacle of nature, then, the only joy now remaining for me, too, as it once had been for Silvestri?

It was no joy.

Now I was no longer thinking of Aurora, or even of myself; and yet those changing colours, those expanses of empty snow, those distant peaks, the sky, the stars, the night, how they caught at my heart!

No, this beauty that I was admiring was no consolation. Quite the contrary.

A wife to end my days with? Yet even if I'd had beside me at that window-sill of the Hôtel du Col the sweetest, wisest woman in all the world, would I have been any nearer, by talking with her, to understanding some of the mystery, to lightening this anguish

weighing me down? Do the bonds of love free us from those other bonds which hold and contain all that lives and exists? Love can give that illusion—maybe, for a few seconds. Then afterwards? Isn't it the same, isn't it worse, afterwards?

Death itself seemed no solution. Would we go on existing? Would we keep our memories? And if we did keep them would we know the answer to the muttered question of that character of Chekov's, why we suffer? We ought to believe that. Why though? Just because we do suffer, and suffer at the mystery of suffering? Is that enough for belief?

No, no, of course not!

Once again, I was lying to myself.

I knew quite well that the company of a someone one loves, someone to whom one binds and dedicates one's own life, is the only real joy we have.

And if I was putting those ultimate questions to myself, if I was even meditating on death and the immortality of the soul, it was only to escape an intimate self-reproach, harsher than evening than usual; here I was, over fifty, and never had I been capable of working up enough impetus to find myself a wife, to create a family. I was an old egoist, beginning to garner the fruits of my lazy, over-cautious maturity. Oh! the bitterness they'd brought me, those women I'd tried to love or believed I loved; above all her to

whom I'd so long been linked without desiring her and just because I didn't desire her! That, I think, had been my most serious mistake. I wanted to be free; I wanted to be alone in my inner self. And I had chosen a woman whom I respected but who didn't attract me, so as never to have to give in to her completely; so as never to hand myself over, all entire, into her hands; so as to reserve to myself alone, in my secret heart, the joys of sensuality.

Hypocritically I'd tried to hide this egotism of mine from my own eyes by telling myself that I'd been born lopsided somehow: that in me esteem and sensual attraction went in inverse proportions; that each of us has his cross, and I had to carry mine with patience. As if every woman I desired was always and every time bound to be unworthy of me! Always too stupid, or too uncultured or too vulgar! And so I discarded them, after enjoying them, one after the other, without ever having made any effort to improve them, to develop their goodness and intelligence, to consider them, in fact, as human beings, not just instruments of my pleasure.

To the very last Aurora had obstinately refused to believe in Silvestri's innocence. Well, what of that? Her mistake, as I seemed to understand it, was due to an obscure sense of guilt. Her hatred for Silvestri was her particular way of suffering; the least ignoble

thing about her. Yes, I thought that I'd understood her; but knew I'd not forgiven her.

Someone was knocking at the door, I had not heard at once. I told whoever it was to come in. I was still at the window and had not put on the light. Now the room was dark. The door opened, and a huge black shadow appeared on the lit wall of the passage. Romolo.

'Sor Avvocato, it's me. I've brought you the car back safe and sound. Thank you ever so much. All's well!'

I put on the light. He handed me over the keys. Then he looked at me a moment in silence, as if trying to guess from my expression the result of my conversation with Aurora. Finally he said:

'Well, did you manage it? Did you convince her to go away for a change of air?'

'No,' I said, 'I couldn't. She doesn't want to.'

The bearded man heaved a sigh like a bellows:

'Ah, women, Sor Avvocato . . . have you a wife? No? Good! Don't, take my advice. All women are more or less the same. They've got tiny brains. Take her, for instance! Aurora! A good girl— girl in a manner of speaking, she's not so young as she was; anyway, a good girl, affectionate, she loves me, looked after me, made a sacrifice for me, coming up to these wild mountains among these goatherds . . . yet she

doesn't understand a thing. I can assure you that it's often a real torture for me to be with her. Not because she's bad, it's not that. But she doesn't understand a thing. She's got a tiny brain, too. The brain of a chicken! Think of a chicken! A brain like that! So there's only one way of dealing with her. . . .'

'What's that?' I asked, amused in spite of myself.

'This,' he said, raising his arm and giving a couple of imaginary slaps in the air with his big hand. 'Hit her—sharp, and quick, *pan!* Infallible. I'm sorry, you know, to talk like this. I'm no sadist, of course. But when she needs it she must have it. And with Aurora, unfortunately, she needs it rather often. Well, excuse my letting myself go, won't you? But when I arrived five minutes ago, I went first to the shop, to see if by any chance you were still there. And I found her, furious, scowling. . . . She didn't even say good-evening to me. Where's the Avvocato, I said? He's gone, she said. Where? On his own business. D'you see? Just like that. And didn't he offer to take you away with him for a few days to rest your nerves a bit? She leapt at me like a wild animal: "What does the Avvocato care about me? What does he care about us? What made you think of such a thing?"'

'No, it's not that, you see, Pollastrini; the fact is that I'm very busy and that . . .'

'Of course! Obviously! I didn't say that to criticize

you, Avvocato; that I'd never do! Just to show you the kind of creature I've got to live with. Luckily, there's that remedy I've just mentioned! Tonight, for example, I know that if I want to eat in peace and get any sleep . . .'

'Listen,' I said, 'there's something I've been trying to din into Aurora's head all afternoon, without success.'

'What? Tell me, do tell me; I'll see to it!' exclaimed the bearded man with a laugh. '

'But it's something that can't be dinned in by blows, I'm afraid. It's a conviction, a mistaken notion, a fixed idea, that Aurora has . . .'

'Ideas, convictions? A chicken's brain, what can you expect? Tell me, do tell me, Sor Avvocato.'

'It's something that happened a long time ago,' I muttered, looking at the bearded man. He was gazing at me obsequiously with those gentle, astute eyes of his, ready to carry out any orders. He too had his humanity of course; he too was suffering, and ill as well. Even so should I speak to him about Silvestri? It would be useless, and ridiculous. Probably he'd pretend to agree with me just to please me, and without understanding any better than Aurora. He was just the man she needed, they were made for each other. I said:

'Nothing, it doesn't matter. Another time, perhaps.

It's a long story, and I haven't time now.' I decided to leave at once. It was still early, not even eight. If I hurried I could make Saint-Raphaël by midnight or one. Romolo resigned himself.

'As you like. So I'm not to say anything to Aurora? Won't you just step over and say good-bye, though?'

'No.' As I answered, a sudden idea came; to give the bearded man a cheque for half a million francs for Aurora, together with a message for her to go on thinking over what I had told her, as she was all wrong about that person we'd discussed. I began moving towards a little writing table which was at the end of the room near the window, put a hand in my pocket to take out the cheque book, then hesitated. If I didn't give that money, I realized I was as good as blotting Aurora out of my memory, as good as condemning her. On the other hand what would be my purpose if I did give it? I thought of the insurance money, of Silvestri's twenty million lire. That hadn't been any use! My real purpose, I feared, was just to keep on good terms with her, so that one day maybe . . .

No, better do nothing.

A few minutes later, having said good-bye to Romolo, I was in the car winding down towards La Vachette. In the rays of the head-lamps the iced-up road was white, the woods black and dark green. Suddenly I noticed an odd sense of well-being. All's

well that ends well, I thought. And I began to whistle. Curve after curve went by with me bouncing gently on my seat, as if cradled by the swaying of the car; I was pleased to leave, pleased to have got 'out' of it all.

Wouldn't Aurora have just been a luxury, a whim? Instead of which I had saved money and had also been loyal to the memory of my dearest friend till the last.



BRIANÇON, LA ROCHE, Embrun, Chorges, Gap; the road, as I gradually descended, was no longer iced but covered with skiddy slime. I was forced to slow down till the Durance valley, where the surface was dry.

Sisteron and Volonne; then I took the fork to the left, for Digne. I had thought of reaching Cannes shortly before midnight and dining there. But it was already past eleven, Cannes was still a hundred and twenty kilometres away, and by now every village I passed was shuttered and asleep; too late for any hope of finding a *bistro* open.

I'd stopped whistling, and felt tired, hungry, cursing my own improvidence and optimism. Or rather, cursing Aurora; for that brilliant idea of not stopping till Cannes and of driving three hundred kilometres through mountains all at one go, was due to an instinct to escape from her as soon and as far as possible.

Unconsciously I wanted to forget her; to see people, friends; a big hotel; get back to my own habits.

In the valley of the Asse, climbing towards Castellane, I came into snow again. It seemed to be newly^a fallen. And I'd just got into Barème, a little hamlet of a few houses, dark and deserted like all the others, when I gave a quiver, a hopeful start, and braked; I'd glimpsed, or thought I'd glimpsed, at the end of a black alley on my right, the gleam of a strong light. Into reverse, a half turn, and there was a small square deep in calm snow, with a frozen fountain, iced trees, a church, a village hall, and a blessed Hôtel des Alpes, the windows of whose terrace were lit along their whole length, for a celebration, a banquet, or some other unusual occasion.

Switching off the motor, I got out. From the brightly-lit windows, sparkling with ice, came the sound of an accordion,* mingled with frequent applause and laughter. At the door now appeared a man dressed as a cook, with blue striped trousers, white jacket, apron and kerchief. He was smoking a cigar and looking towards me as I shut the car door. He had heavy black moustaches and a pleasant satisfied air. But he suddenly shouted to me:

'Y a pas besoin de fermer, Monsieur. Nous ne sommes pas en Italie, ici.'

I'm no chauvinist. But I don't like hearing my own country insulted. And if the lateness of the hour and

my own hunger had not at once decided me to let this pass, I'd have had some doubts about the cooking of so inhospitable a cook. I was wrong about that. The cook, who was also the owner of the little hotel, noticed my start of embarrassment, guessed he'd made a mistake, confirmed it by a glance at the number plate on my car, and made up for it at once:

'I was just joking, monsieur. There are bandits everywhere. France isn't any safer than Italy. Do come in, monsieur. You've dined? It's quite unusual for me to be open so late! Why, you'll find some compatriots inside! We're full of Italians here, *des piémontais; piemontesi!* The employees of all the hotels around are having their annual dinner!'

He explained to me as he invited me to enter, that every year, once the main Christmas holidays were over—that is, a few days after Epiphany—the waiters, maids, porters, scullions, in fact the entire personnel of four or five hotels in the neighbourhood would meet there and celebrate the end of the season with a dinner offered them by their various hotel-proprietors clubbed together. I hate official dinners; but I had no other choice, so in I went.

The dining-room was almost entirely filled by a big square table. All round the four sides, facing each other, were sitting the guests. On the veranda,

a little apart, a fair youth was playing the accordion. They were all talking, laughing, singing confusedly. The dinner was almost at its end.

M. Abbes, as the host was called, made me sit down in a corner near the stove; and offered me his speciality, which, in spite of the late hour, he had ready because of the dinner; trout, *pied et paquet*, *pâté de grives*, etc.

I ate hurriedly, wanting to leave again at once. But, involuntarily, I found myself taking an interest in the waiters' dinner.

Piedmontese, yes, nearly all of them, and nearly all from the Cunco valleys. Some Italian only by origin, others still by nationality, they all without exception spoke French, and only occasionally let out a word or two of their ancient dialect, a swearword or a dirty phrase.

They weren't, I had to admit, what are called a fine-looking lot. Seeing them altogether like that they showed more signs of their profession than characteristics of their race.

The mountaineers of the Cunco valleys are generally men and women full of strength and health, though a bit rough. These seemed brutalized and made flabby by their jobs and by rubbing shoulders with a higher class from whom they had acquired no compensatory qualities at all.

Pale, unkempt, middle-aged women; spotty youths; gaunt, bent, exhausted-looking men. They were drinking cheap, sparkling wine, eating cakes and cheese, all in great confusion and jollity. A tall, knobbly, fairish man of about fifty, with a flat red face, dressed in brown, was constantly getting up to tell little dirty stories, which ended each time, with a play on obscene words. There was loud laughter every time and applause, particularly from the women; then the man sat down again and had a drink, while everyone immediately demanded another story.

‘The one about the bananas, Jeannot!’

‘Jeannot, the one about the three priests!’

‘And then, the story of the horse that wasn’t hungry!’

‘Yes, we want the story of the horse!’

M. Abbes, out of politeness, seeing I was alone and also perhaps to remedy the blunder he’d made on first addressing me, had come to sit at my table, bringing his glass of *pastis*. Without my asking him he told me that the man in the brown suit had married, a few months before, a woman of over seventy, whose daughter had long been his mistress. She, the daughter, was there at the table, and he pointed her out; a woman of about forty with neat clothes and a severe face, hair carefully drawn back, different from the other women there; when everyone else was

guffawing, her thin bloodless lips just parted in a smile.

I asked M. Abbes why on earth the man hadn't married the daughter instead of the mother.

'*Mais pour le fric, naturellement!*' and he explained to me that the old woman had a little money saved, but was in good health and very mean; and he was too impatient to wait. He'd never been much of a one for work, M. Abbes explained; in the summer, at the peak of the rush, he was called in as extra waiter.

I looked at him and at the woman and at all the others; each of them must have his own little existence, his own problems and his own sins. Their faces seemed worked and incised by life, as if written, each of them, in a different unique script, indecipherable except to those who knew their particular cases. Now, for instance, I felt I could read the lineaments of that woman and that man like words. With all the others I could only get a confused impression of their circumstances and minds. . . . Oh, well, they were laughing, laughing as if they hadn't a care in the world, enjoying their evening of jollity.

Is this all life is? I don't know why, but I found myself thinking that the condition and fate of entire humanity in every class and every country could not, at bottom, be so very different from that of the

poor wretches under my eyes, like an allegory, a ballet, evoked specially for me. Yes, one is born, works more or less, loves more or less, and then, very quickly, one dies. Worrying about Aurora and myself, about her feelings and mine, seemed, all of a sudden, so silly and petty, so vain. Insipid complications, presumptuous pretentious, false: that was how I'd spent that day, and perhaps, alas, my life as well!

But my thoughts were interrupted by a longer and louder burst of applause, and with it a rhythmic shout.

'Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!'

An old man whom I'd noticed at the end of the big table, and who had struck me because of his high, curly, white quiff of hair, in odd contrast to his almost dwarf-like stature, had now got up, glass in hand, as if ready for a speech.

'Dis-donc, Arthur!' the man in the brown suit shouted at him from the other end of the table. 'Tell us all now, d'you still make love?'

'Cristou!' replied the old man in Piedmontese dialect, and threw back his head with a laugh which had perhaps nothing particular or exceptional about it, but which, to me, presumably due to my state of mind that night and at that moment, seemed ghastly; the howl of a damned man.

They hoisted him by force on to his chair; and even

there he was only a little taller than all the others, who were sitting and settling down, to listen. Silence was called for. The accordion was silent too. Turning towards the player, the old man announced:

'Maman est une étoile.'

It was the title of a song; one, no doubt, from early in the century. The accordion started up the introduction, a waltz movement; and, in a raucous, husky voice, glass in his hand, the old man struck up:

*'Bébé a cinq ans et ce matin-là
Il délaiss' boudeur ses jolis soldats . . .*

There was something about this little scene, simple though it was, that made me feel uncomfortable. Probably it was the old man's face, his expression, his voice. They disturbed me, gave me the sense of a subtle corroding bitterness, a confused, faraway remorse, in which I could not remember exactly where my own fault lay. I tried to remember; at the same time I must admit I hoped I wouldn't; I looked at the old man and felt strangely ill at ease:

*'Maman c'est une grande étoile,
Comm' t'en vois là-haut dans les cieux,
Sur la terre ell' brille sans voile
Pour la joie, le plaisir des yeux. . . .*

At the words *sans voile*, the old man had made with

his right hand a delicate sinuous gesture, describing the nudity of the revue star; he had twisted himself down, pushing out his chest and backside, closing his eyes and smiling with an expression of obscene beatitude. The guests broke into loud roars of laughter. The women bent double and dried their tears. For me, on the other hand, it was torture; I felt as if in the drunken old man I'd recognized my own father or my dearest friend. Why?

Of course the sight of indecorous old age is always unpleasant. The nearing of death should, it seems, be reflected in more rigorous behaviour, and that is true for every man, whether he believes or not in the immortality of his own soul and in a divine judgment on his own life.

It hurt me to look at that old man; under his squalid gaiety I sensed a resignation, a desperate fatalism, a consciousness of having renounced, for the whole of his past life and the little time he still had left, every shred of dignity. As if, by his singing and his jokes, he was saying: 'I'm in hell already! So I may as well make the most of it!'

All this was only too clear. But was that enough to explain the acute, definite, personal effect of this spectacle on myself? After all he was just a painful case like any other; there are so many of them. Why, then, should I feel myself directly involved? And why, now

that the old man was ending his song on a high, cracked note, broken by a fit of coughing, did I feel an unreasoning impulse to get up and go over, among the others, to shake his hand?

Which is what I did.

Grinning, the old man clung to my hand and looked at me with strange eyes glittering darkly between the half-shut lids, as if establishing some absurd complicity between us.

I felt even more uncomfortable than a short time before, when he had imitated the naked revue star. But he did not let me go; for a second, with that dark glitter in his eyes, he seemed to scrutinize me; then, opening his toothless mouth in a laugh of mutual complicity, he came so close that I thought he was going to embrace me (the smell of his breath!) and murmured:

'On comprend que vous aimez la musique, Monsieur!', a phrase which from his expression seemed to be only a conventional one, whose real meaning was different, known only to him and me. So much so that at that moment, I could neither reply nor move. I stayed there, fascinated, watching his gross lop-sided features, his pointed chin, his black mouth, and particularly his white, wavy, piled-up hair which seemed to be growing in an extraordinarily vigorous, almost shameless way. Eventually I said:

'You sing very well and you have a magnificent head of hair!'

Then one of the group nearby said to me:

'Monsieur, you should have seen him when his head was all shaven!'

And they all burst into a loud roar of laughter, which obviously alluded to some fact of which I was ignorant. Another added:

'He was waist-high!'

More laughter, two or three clapped his shoulder. 'Sacré Arthur!'

The old man sat down again; and I went back to my table, where M. Abbes was waiting for me. He at once began in a low voice to tell me Arthur's story.

He was a scullion, now, in a little hotel at Senez, a village about five kilometres away. Once he had been a porter at the Bon Accueil of Castellane. The war came, the Germans arrived and requisitioned the Bon Accueil. Arthur, for all that time, was odd job man and pimp for the Germans. It seems that he was also a spy, at least so everyone said. The area was full of *maquisards*; the Germans often took hostages and shot them. There had never been any real proof against Arthur. But as he had always been with the Germans and even seemed to have been silly enough to boast of it, at the liberation they shaved his head like the girls

who had *collaborated*. Today everyone remembered this, but everyone had forgiven him.

'*C'est un pauvre type, que voulez-vous, Monsieur!*' concluded M. Abbes.

IT WAS TOO late to set off again now, and I felt exhausted. So I asked M. Abbes if he had a room. He came with me to the car to get my bag, and then upstairs.

A nice room, a good bed, but as for sleeping . . . as for sleeping, well, that was another matter.

The hotel-people down below were still making a tremendous row, and in the first short doze produced by a few glasses of Armagnac I kept on seeing again and again the face of the old man, his eyes, his toothless mouth. '*On comprend que vous aimez la musique, Monsieur!*'

Yes, as he said that his dark grey eyes had scrutinized me deeper and deeper and it now seemed to me that the real meaning of his phrase was: 'We two understand each other.'

I could not get to sleep, and tried to distract myself by thinking of something else.

Aurora . . . but neither was Aurora a subject that could bring me rest. During my life I had known other people, particularly women, similar to her in character;

so simple, instinctive and natural, so preoccupied with material reality that they were extremely difficult to convince. But none like Aurora had made this impression of an unbreachable wall, of a mind hopelessly closed to any ray of moral truth.

And my thoughts returning to her without wanting to, as was only natural after all the hours I'd spent in her company listening to the story of most of her life, I was seized once more by that unpleasant sense of discomfort and impotence I'd felt while she was talking to me and I wasn't capable of talking to her; of talking to her in a way she could understand.

Now, in the darkness, broken only by a weak light seeping between the window-curtains (I could sense the white reflexions of the street-lamps on the snowy little square) and with the din and the songs getting more and more raucous on the floor below, I tossed and turned in the quilts and sheets of the little wooden bed, torturing myself with the thought that it had all been my fault; I'd been incapable of presenting any actions or qualities or words of dear old Silvestri which would get through to Aurora and convince her.

For instance, during that last period of his life, and so at a time when, according to Aurora, Silvestri must already have known of her relations with Romolo and was already using that knowledge for

his nefarious ends, I suddenly remembered his asking me if I hadn't noticed a deepening gulf between her and Almagià, and if I hadn't thought of the possibility of a separation, even of a divorce, between them; in which case, he concluded, he hoped to marry her himself.

Marry her! Rather different from blackmailing her!

Oh dear! That was an argument I should have used to Aurora: Silvestri had wanted to marry her.

And that day I'd frankly told him my opinion, which was that the marriage (I thought like everyone else that it was a real marriage) between Aurora and Almagià was a very close one just because it was founded on mutual hypocrisy. I considered Aurora, I said, a venal woman and so most unlikely to want to rid herself of so prosperous a husband, and Almagià, a staid, vain, conventional man, and so also most unlikely to want such a change unless he were absolutely forced into it by Aurora's behaviour, which, as far as we knew, was perfect.

Suddenly, I remembered Silvestri's reply:

'But that very hypocrisy's my hope. She doesn't love him. It can't last. The behaviour of a woman who doesn't love her husband is never perfect.'

Quite.

Of course I'd always taken these words in the usual romantic sense of all Silvestri's remarks, that a woman

who doesn't love her husband is always more or less ready, more or less open to another man, to a true love, in fact to Love; so that he could hope one day to be this man himself for her, this love. . . .

At that moment, from below, began a crashing of pots and pans and rhythmic bangs on the table, one two, one two, and the waiters in chorus began singing again that song of Arthur's:

*'Maman c'est une grande étoile,
Comin' t'en vois là-haut dans les cieux. . .*

Once more I saw Arthur's dark glittering eyes and black mouth (*'on comprend que vous aimez la musique, Monsieur'*), and could not manage to thrust the revolting image away. I even seemed, at that moment, to pick his hoarse voice out among all those others, male and female, of the chorus.

Suppose, I found myself reflecting, suppose Silvestri had meant something else?

'The behaviour of a woman who doesn't love her husband is never perfect.'

What else?

I shut my eyes in the darkness so as not to see the faint glimmer from the window, thrust my head under the feather pillow and stopped up my ears.

Silvestri!

Silvestri!

Gustavo!

I tried to hear his voice again as he said:

'The behaviour of a woman who doesn't love her husband is never perfect.'

His voice.

Did I hear it again?

Slightly muffled, slightly squeaky, with the rolled French 'r'.

Did I hear it again?

And his look? And his smile? And his eyes, the eyes of a short-sighted man without glasses, laughing amid the wrinkles and the half-closed lids, with that slyness which I knew to be so childish? Did I see him, see his face again?

'The behaviour of a woman who doesn't love her husband is never perfect.'

I couldn't, however much I forced my imagination, I couldn't succeed in seeing his face clearly, couldn't succeed in hearing his voice clearly.

No, I said to myself, the 'r' wasn't like that . . . it was more of a faint ripple.

No, his smile wasn't so wrinkled, nor his lids so tight. And his eyes were green and glittering. . . . But . . . but . . . was that slyness of his really so childish?

'The behaviour of a woman who doesn't love her husband is never perfect.'

Suppose, instead, he'd meant to tell me that Aurora's behaviour, just because she didn't love her husband, was *no longer* perfect? If his eyes, his smile, his tone had meant to tell me, or to hint that *he knew* Aurora's behaviour wasn't perfect?

Could that possibly have been Silvestri's intention, or at least his thought?

Was that possible?

It was possible, alas.

I could no longer remember his face, his voice, anything about him, clearly. I was no longer sure of anything.

And so, after all, it was possible that Silvestri, during the conversation with the maid on the telephone, and the meeting in the restaurant-car next day, had noticed. . . . It was possible that Silvestri knew of Romolo, it was possible that Silvestri had behaved to Aurora just as Aurora believed he had.

Was the face of my friend one that could look 'devilish and dirty'?

I don't think so, I don't know; certainly not to me, but to someone who didn't know him, or knew him in another way. . . . Heavens, now I found I couldn't help seeing Silvestri's face except twisted in a diabolic grin.

A photograph?

I had no photograph of him with me. But if I had,

I wouldn't have dared look at it. The same thing happens to photographs of dead people as to their bodies when they come back to us, light and docile, in our dreams. If one stares at them for long enough they yield to the impulse of our feelings. They yield with a kind of waver, change and melt swiftly into symbols that are also dead.

It was possible, alas! Aurora's story was all possible.

Silvestri had understood about Romolo at once, from the moment of that meeting in the restaurant-car. And he had tried to blackmail Aurora; but ambiguously, without compromising himself, in such a way as to be able, afterwards, to pretend the contrary, to set his own innocence, proclaim his own love. In fact, Silvestri had wanted to frighten Aurora little by little until she felt she was being blackmailed and so yielded to him, but in such a way that, when she found she loved him in return, she could still be convinced that he had not blackmailed her at all.

That was why, when Aurora, exasperated by his game, had suddenly herself blurted out that name (*Romolo*, the name he had never pronounced himself so as to give her no proof, not only of his intention, but even of his capacity to blackmail her), Silvestri would have felt the ground giving way under his feet.

'Remember, if you say a word about Romolo to Ulderico, I'll kill you.'

At these words of Aurora's, *he suddenly seemed to go all limp.*

That was also why, before leaving her that afternoon, at the very last moment as he was getting out of the taxi, he would have played his last card; he would have fixed her with staring eyes as if trying to hypnotize her, and asked her breathlessly, 'Who's Romolo?'

Hoping, by this way, to persuade her still, and so save himself.

A man in love, willing to pay anything to gain his end, knows he can't offer money directly to the woman he adores, and finds a way out by giving, without offending her, some expensive present. Silvestri, who was not rich, would have been playing a desperate game with the means at his disposal. This could also explain his last visit to me that Sunday afternoon, and his last words: *'you haven't realized I've crossed the Rubicon.'*

How often I myself, who considered I was quite incapable of blackmailing a woman and had never done such a thing in my life, had gained favour with a bracelet, or pearls, or a diamond ring!

I know it's a simpler method, and a quicker one too. It seems cleaner. But, really, it's just as vile. If I put a

hand to my conscience, I had to admit having done nothing else, all my love-life.

In fact, I had to admit it; Aurora's story was possible. And I even found a certain peace of mind in reconstructing it for myself like that, from beginning to end, and in explaining it rationally, following the logic—or rather the sophistry—of Silvestri as Aurora had never been able to do.

And was I sure, anyway, that it was the truth?
Who knows?

One thing was certain, though; that I overcame the turmoil, the anguish of that night only when I admitted to myself that I could have been mistaken, that it was possible that I had never really known my best friend.

Meanwhile even the choruses and shouts and din from the waiters below were fading away.

Now I could hear them coming out on to the square in separate groups, laughing, greeting each other with drunken cries, an isolated voice taking up a song again, moving off.

Finally someone, probably M. Abbes, banged down the hotel shutters rather violently.

Gradually, one after the other, the distant voices faded into the night silence of the winter mountains.

Supine, on the bed, motionless staring into the darkness, I went over the final arguments in cold blood.

Aurora, it's true, had said she'd been brought up by nuns; but I guessed she had said that as a boast, to give me a rather better impression of her family and background. Obviously nuns had contributed nothing to her education.

Never had I met, and it was difficult for me even to imagine, a creature simpler than Aurora, with her belief only in herself and money and man's struggle with man to lay hands on it. Brutality, fate; that was all life was for her. She had a really earthy view of reality; all concrete, visible, tangible facts; nothing beyond, nothing imaginary, nothing speculative, nothing reflective; nothing uncertain, vague, supposed or thought.

How then could she only *suppose* that Silvestri, from the meeting in the restaurant car, had guessed both Romolo's false identity and her own intrigue with him? Just suppose it, and not *know* it positively? How could she worry and even, apparently, torture herself about an impression, an intuition? And so right on till the last, how could she, that simple, positive woman, have been deceived, worked up, frightened by a fantasy?

Was it not more likely that, in order to save Silvestri from her accusations, while listening to her story, I had attributed to her a mentality which was very familiar to me and which did not correspond to hers at all?

To justify Aurora's mistake, I had made up an obscure sense of guilt for her. But she was probably right. What's this subconscious? A lot of nonsense. . . . The sense of guilt did not come into it. Aurora was not capable of remorse; only of regret. She was, at heart, a decent woman; brutal, very simple, but all of one piece, and not vulgar as I had thought. Not very intelligent, perhaps. There Romolo may have been right. But, in her own way, warm-hearted and generous. And in her own way, but quite sincerely, she had loved Romolo. She had dedicated herself to him with great self-sacrifice, and lost for him all she possessed.

As for Silvestri, if I wanted to solve that final problem before yielding to the drowsiness which was now finally coming over me, I would have to throw all my subtleties overboard and gird myself very humbly with simple common sense.

My conclusion, banal perhaps, was this: Even if Aurora had exaggerated, she could not have invented everything. There must be some truth in her story. And so I had to face a picture of Silvestri rather different from the one to which I was accustomed.

Love, affection, friendship, it is said, are the best forms of understanding. But sometimes we find the face of which we were fondest, the face whose thoughts we had from long habit thought to read so clearly

appear suddenly, when least expected (and it may not need a story like Aurora's; sometimes just a phrase repeated, a tiny detail, is enough), strange and mysterious to us, like some unknown who stops his car momentarily beside us at traffic lights and stares in silence through the window for the few slow seconds that the lights show red. Surprised and wounded, we are almost inclined to accuse our friend of betraying us. Then, thinking it over, we realize that our constant intercourse throughout the years has deadened our capacity to see him alive, and reduced him to little more than a puppet, to a being, that is, with reactions all could foresee, to a habitual, conventional, gentle, restful companion. Suddenly realizing the error we've fallen into, we are inclined at first to blame our own affection. But soon, in our suffering at the deceit, and as we think it over, we begin to suspect, with a first touch of remorse, that the responsibility is ours alone. We soon come to see that what had hidden our friend's real self from us was not our affection, but a lack, a weakness, a laziness in that affection.

Even if Aurora's account was only true in part, I realized that *I had thought* of myself as very fond of Silvestri; in reality, I had just surrounded my friend with a false halo, romantic, idyllic, crepuscular. I had boasted secretly to myself of my great affection for him; in reality I had seen in him only what I found it

comfortable to see, his nostalgia for old Piedmont, for the countryside, the last century; a nostalgia which was mine and not his, and, in every case, more mine than his. I had imagined Silvestri as being what I had renounced being myself, a disinterested poet, unpractical, faithful to traditions, to the land, the sacrosanct memories of youth. . . .

In reality he was just a man, like me and like any other. That was all. It did not occur to me to forgive him, because it did not occur to me (not even if I'd thought the whole of Aurora's story true) to accuse him. I was just as fond of him as before. More than before. For now, perhaps, I knew him better.

I reached Saint-Raphaël next day, towards twelve. Dogliotti was there waiting for me with a notary and the vendor of the villa. I spent the afternoon discussing the contract. And in the evening, remembering Aurora, I went to Monte Carlo.

There was a blonde there with a hard horse-face and a splendid bare back, who was winning again and again at roulette. I followed her, and began betting on 9, 18, 27 and 36. At first I won a lot. Then very quickly, I lost nearly double what I'd won.

I moved over to the cashier's and paid up. As I was there, I made out another cheque, to Aurora, for the sum which she hoped to get from Almagià; and sent

it off with a short note. I said her idea had brought me luck; I'd come to Monte Carlo and won, so it was only right I should send her the money she needed.

On my return to Rome I found a telegram of thanks.

Months passed. Summer came, and autumn. Now it's winter once again.

I haven't seen Aurora. And everything makes me think we shall never meet again.